



PAINT ME A TALE

A novella by Papri Rudra



Dedicated to every friend ,who helped me see the world, in all its different colours.

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Holiday in Jheelpukur

The town of Jheelpukur seemed to be awake at last. The hustle-bustle of the starting day had finally shaken Jharnaa out of her sleep, but more than the sounds of the bus stop it was the crisp, clear air, descending from the hills, which finally announced the arrival of day to her young, sleepy eyes.

Looking about her, she saw her mother and father getting ready to embark from the bus. Everything seemed to happen in a hurry, once they had got down from the bus. There were grandfather and Uncle Deepak already waiting for them, hugging them the next minute, whisking off their luggage into the big Sumo and they were on their way home. Jharnaa, as always, perplexed and at the same time envious, at how easy it was for the adults to carry on an animated conversation. She looked at her mother's tired but happy face, sharing so much with her father and brother while her father, though not talking as much as her, seemed to be visibly relaxed and comfortable, hearing to all the discussions. Almost everything, under the sun could be and was being discussed in that comfortable family car.

It was the same when they reached the family bungalow. The whole family was there to welcome them and fuss over them, after their so-called long journey from the city.

It was not the usual scene for the Chakraborty family bungalow, but this was the time of the summer holidays and the whole family was assembled to celebrate the holidays together, in the small and scenic town of Jheelpukur.

The extended Chakraborty family comprised of Jharnaa's maternal grandfather and grandmother and their three children, two sons and one daughter and their respective families. The eldest son was Deepak, followed by Jharnaa's mother Madhuri and youngest son Prateek. Deepak's son Shekhar was a tall, handsome boy of about fifteen years and without doubt the favourite cousin of Jharnaa. He was gentle and considerate towards all the younger cousins and Jharnaa liked him very much. He could also be a lot of fun. So, it pleased Jharnaa when she was awarded by one of Shekhar's smiles, though he rushed off soon after to touch the feet of his just-arrived Aunt Madhuri and Uncle Ajeet. Uncle Prateek's sons, the twins Appu and Pappu, younger than Jharnaa by about three years, not to be outdone in enthusiasm, were upon Jharnaa in a moment and though she found herself amused by their delight, she knew that before very long, they would drive her up the wall, by their pranks.

Nevertheless, the whole family was reunited after a whole year and everyone was happy to see each other. It promised to be a wonderful family vacation. For Jharnaa, it was to be her first summer vacation with her new family.

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Jheelpukur derived its name from the singular lake which lay at the centre of this beautiful town, nestled in the lap of the mountains. It was as if the hills nestled the town in their lap and the town in its turn nestled the pretty lake, an offspring of the mountains, in its own lap, for the town and its life was built all around this lake. The fact that the source of this lake was a spring, somewhere in the mountains and that this lake, through a narrow, almost hidden, passage connected itself to a river, to eventually complete the eternal connection between hills and ocean, could have been but a magnanimously kept secret. So still, almost like a mirror was its surface that certain complacency seemed to radiate out of it, and it was this peace and quiet which flowed through the breath of the town.

Grandfather always insisted on a walk by the *Jheel* every evening. It would give them a good appetite; he said and make them appreciate grandmother's cooking even more.

Jharnaa loved these walks very much, especially if she was eventually left alone with grandfather after a while; so that she could just sit quietly, without having to say anything or do anything. Appu and Pappu could always find some other amusements along the way; the adults always had concerns of their own and there was something dignified and comfortable about grandfather's presence. He could be there, without making you feel conscious about yourself.

It was on one such walk when grandfather asked her, "Are you happy Jharnaa?"

She was startled. Young as she was, she somehow sensed that she was being asked one of the most difficult questions of her life.

"Of course, why should I be unhappy?"

"I did not ask if you are unhappy. I asked if you are happy. They are not one and the same thing." answered Grandfather thoughtfully but with a smile.

"Yes, I think I am quite happy, though I do not have everything I would like to have", Jharnaa answered after a while.

"for example?", grandfather asked her.

"for example, I would like to have a friend. Someone I could talk to and share a lot of things with", she said after some silence.

"So, don't you have friends now?"

“Yes, I do but not in that way. There is nobody I could share everything with. It is as if I know the limitations of every relationship. I can tell up to this much to someone but not beyond this. No one ever specifies this precise limit, but I just seem to know.”

“Why do you think, you want someone to know all?”

“I am not sure about the reason, but I somehow feel it would be good to know that someone is there who could appreciate it the way I do.”

“Has it ever occurred to you that you and your thoughts might be special and being special they cannot be shared with everyone?”

“Now, that you say it, I confess that I have sometimes thought about it that way, but it does not seem very correct”, Jharnaa replied, looking straight into his wise, calm eyes.

“Why is it not correct?”

“Is not this thought a proud one? As if, I consider myself superior to the others!” Jharnaa was hesitant.

“Well, everyone has his own view but, in my opinion, liking or appreciating oneself should not be mutually exclusive of one’s appreciation of others. After all, the five fingers of our hand are not alike and that seems the best for our hand as such”, explained grandfather, “In fact, the thumb which appears to be the oddest one out is but what adds dexterity to the human hand.”

Jharnaa was quiet for a while.

“It would be nice to have a friend like you want and I am not saying that you are wrong to desire that but even if you do not have one, you must not feel alone. You always have your family and most importantly, you have yourself.” grandfather’s voice was now very gentle but firm.

“I hope, you do not think me ungrateful, grandfather”, Jharnaa’s voice was quiet and disturbed.

“Of course not, Jharnaa. You need not think that I am judging you at all. Just because you want a little more than what you have, does not make you necessarily ungrateful. It is only that sometimes, it helps to try to interpret things in a different way. No one can help you do that, more than you Jharnaa. Make sure that you never forget this.” grandfather said quietly.

“How does the sky look to you, Jharnaa? What is the first thought that comes to your mind, when you look up at it?” continued grandfather, after some silence.

"It depends. When it is of a plain, solid colour, it looks like a giant canvas to me, waiting to be filled up with lot many things. At other times, they seem to have patterns of their own. You can interpret them as you want."

"Have you ever thought of writing them down or painting pictures about them?"

"No, never thought of it that way, but it seems like a good idea"

"Well, do then. You might like it. You can write down if you like something well or anything you think worth remembering." grandfather suggested.

Jharnaa simply nodded and was quiet.

Jharnaa, to most people who knew her, appeared quieter and more matured for her nine years but years are not always the only contributors to one's understanding of life. It has a lot to do with the way life treats you and how you, in your turn, treat life.

Jharnaa had been an only child and therefore the apple of her parents' eyes, till they had died in a car crash about two years ago. Her future uncertain, she had watched the older people trying to decide as what to do with her. They had all been kind but unsure about how she should be handled, till her father's long-time friend, Ajeet and his wife Madhuri had come forward, offering to adopt her legally and fill their own empty nest with a lovable child. It had not been an easy decision for either side to accept this arrangement. Madhuri, after a brief illness, had been told by doctors that she would never be a mother and she had been doubtful about being able to love a stranger, adopted from an orphanage. Jharnaa was different. She was the little daughter of their family friends and almost like a little niece to herself and Ajeet. Madhuri had surprised everybody, including herself, when she had announced her decision to accept Jharnaa as her child. Later, she had confessed to her mother that she herself had been surprised at this suggestion of her heart, as if not she, but some strange power inside her had made this momentous decision.

So, Jharnaa had now been their legally adopted daughter, for the last two years and this was her first vacation at Jheelpukur, with the extended family.

Madhuri had fretted in the initial days, sometimes doubting her own ability to mother another's child. She had thought that if Jharnaa was anything less than radiantly happy, she herself was to blame. Finally, her father had calmed her fears with the words "All we can hope for is that her love for us, will one day be greater than her gratitude towards us", for Jharnaa was a grateful child.

Now, as they watched the sun slowly steal in behind the blue hills, Jharnaa pondered upon grandfather's words.

The next day brought a surprise for Jharnaa. She got a gift, from grandfather. It was a small brown package, beautifully packed, with “for Jharnaa” written on it. She was not the only one to be given a gift. Grandfather and grandmother had similar packages for all four of their grandchildren.

On opening the package, Jharnaa discovered that it was a leather-bound brown diary but the best thing about it was that the front cover had her name inscribed in golden letters, so that it looked like a novel titled “Jharnaa”. It brought a smile to her lips. She looked about for grandfather to thank him but could not catch his eye. He was busy listening to the twins’ prattle about their gifts.

She remembered their conversation last evening and wondered. Having shared a thought with grandfather had wrought this and suddenly she felt a weight of expectation on her shoulders. However, grandfather did not even ask her if she liked her gift. Perhaps, Jharnaa thought, he had covertly spotted her delight and been reassured of the aptness of the gift.

She carried her precious gift with her to her own room and opened the pages. They were blank of course. There seemed to be no need to write down her name on it as such because the diary itself was titled ‘Jharnaa’ but still she did. It seemed to seal her claim upon that bundle of fresh, white pages. Oh, what affection we all have for our own names! Of all written words that a human being can ever lay his hands on, somehow his own name, no wonder how innocuous or unimpressive, would be the most adorable to him. Even Shakespeare would have loved to see his own name, printed down at the bottom of the very famous quotation by himself, about a name not being very important.

Thus started Jharnaa’s love affair with ‘Jharnaa’. The diary was like a dear friend and everyday life so rich in special events that they had to be narrated to this dear friend. Though dumb itself, ‘Jharnaa’ became the keeper of many memories and sensations of the girl Jharnaa. Jharnaa also started maintaining a chronology of the important events in her life, in the diary. This chronology was started from the backside pages of the diary, gradually approaching the front. A walk around the lake or the pranks of the twins, they all found a sympathetic recorder, in Jharnaa.

Still, a diary is after all just a diary. It cannot take the place of a living, speaking friend one would like to share one’s thoughts with. ‘Jharnaa’ was a good listener but she lacked the ability of speech and reaction. In other words, she could patiently bear the weight of Jharnaa’s own experiences, but she could never offer her own take on the facts so diligently reported to her.

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Last two days had been dull for the kids. It had been raining steadily, restricting the kids indoors and of course Appu and Pappu were restless. However today, the sun had finally peeped out from behind the clouds, uplifting everyone's mood. It was decided that they should all partake a light breakfast and later walk to a nearby meadow, which had a stream flowing through it ,for a picnic lunch. Even Jharnaa who was usually a quiet child, was more than excited as they set out. The walk, though not a very long one had been a nice and invigorating one. Grandmother had of course packed a big lunch, full of lots of goodies for the kids. So, the lunch, when they finally got around to it, was delicious and heavy. They still had some hours of sunlight left, so instead of turning back right way, grownups were still sitting around chatting, while the kids could wander about on their own. Appu and Pappu had of course umpteen things to do. Jharnaa joined in with them for a while but she was no match for the hare-brained schemes or the mischiefs, which they wanted to foist on her, so after a while, she pleaded tiredness and they left her alone. Shekhar too seemed more engrossed in his book, so Jharnaa was left to her own devices. She slowly started walking and guided by the sound of rushing water, soon found herself on the banks of a gentle stream.

It was not actually very far from the place where their picnic party was camped but there were a couple of massive trees with deep hanging branches that kind of shielded her from their sight. She could still hear their sounds, be it the frenzied screams of the boisterous twins or the gentle murmur of her family's conversations but she could not see them. So, she gently sat down on the ground and closed her eyes. It was a peaceful spot and Jharnaa felt relaxed and oddly happy. Slowly the peace of the place enveloped her so that, even the sounds that had been drifting in from the picnic party, slowly fell away. So, she was genuinely surprised when looking up, she found a strange girl with long braids and a thoughtful expression on her cherubic brown face, looking at her intently.

Jharnaa was taken aback for a moment. She had considered herself completely alone, so finding someone so close and observing her so carefully, did stun her for a second. However, she soon snapped back to attention and sat up consciously. She did not say anything at once, but her face was a question mark as she stared back at the newcomer. This newcomer had dark brown hair, two large eyes set in an oval face and a rather serious expression on her face. To Jharnaa, she also looked vaguely familiar, as if she had seen the girl somewhere before but could not quite remember, when and where. Since the girl did not seem to show any inclination to volunteer any information about herself, Jharnaa decided to initiate.

"Who are you? Why are you staring at me like that?" Jharnaa had wished to sound haughty but her voice came out barely louder than a whisper.

The girl didn't answer. In fact, she seemed to consider Jharnaa's voice for a second and when she spoke, it was not the answer Jharnaa had expected.

"I should be the one asking you this question. You are sitting in my place. So, tell me who you are?"

Jharnaa was again taken aback. She had liked the place and had sat down on an empty spot. It had never occurred to her that this place could be someone else's property. So, she retorted with more courage.

"I did not know this place belonged to anyone. As far as I know, it does *not* belong to anyone. So, how can you say it belongs to you? I don't mind telling you my name though. My name is Jharnaa. What is yours?"

"Hmm. So, you are Jharnaa. Isn't that a strange name?" The girl seemed to ponder over this weighty issue. The serious expression on her face was still the same but she slowly sat down by Jharnaa as she uttered them."

Jharnaa wanted to ask as what was strange about her name. It was a good enough name, as far names go but somehow, she decided to wait for the girl to explain herself, rather than barge in with questions of her own.

The girl however, had no intention of doing any such thing. Instead of volunteering her own name, she countered with another question of her own. "What do you do, Jharnaa?", she asked.

Once again, Jharnaa was more than surprised. What did she do? Jharnaa wondered what she was supposed to say to such a thing? What does a nine-year-old girl do? She guessed she did all the usual things, like going to school, play with her friends and listened to her parents and so on. Right now, she was on a picnic with her family. So, she guessed that was another thing she did-go for picnics! Maybe, talking to strange girls should also be added to that illustrious list of activities that she did! Yet, she didn't say any of these things. What she did say was the most outrageous thing she could possibly have said, under that circumstance, in fact under any circumstance for that matter.

"I write." Jharnaa blurted out and was stunned at her own response.

The girl however, did not seem to find this surprising at all. You would think, she met girls who wrote for a living, every single day of her life, for the calmness with which she accepted this fact. Once again, she seemed to be absorbing and processing this nugget of information very carefully. Her next question too was equally unpredictable.

"Is writing easy? Can't you just draw some pictures?"

“Pictures?” Jharnaa’s voice was incredulous. She had actually been preparing herself for the girl to query her about as what she liked to write about and so on but once again she was stumped.

She nodded in confusion for a while. Then ventured forth.

“Well, I do draw and paint sometimes, but I write more.” She paused for a moment to gather her thoughts and then went on.

“You see, I write about whatever interests me. It can be people I meet or the things I see or experience. Sometimes, I even write about my own feelings. It may not be so easy to draw pictures about all these things. At least, they will call for lots of pictures and that can be cumbersome, isn’t it?” Somehow, Jharnaa sounded defensive, as if it was imperative that this girl grasp why Jharnaa preferred writing to drawing pictures.

The girl was quiet for a few moments. The silence around them was unbroken. Jharnaa found herself vaguely wondering as why there was no sound coming from the side of her family also. However, she dared not break this silence for the girl seemed to be deep in thought and she was afraid of disturbing her.

Finally the girl sighed. It was a soft sound, barely registering, in the stillness around them.

“Yes, you are right. Pictures are more difficult. Specially, when they must be painted. You never find the right colours and then it is disappointing.” Jharnaa also sighed. It was a relief that the girl, for once had said something on her own instead of asking Jharnaa some question again. Having already given up any hope of eliciting any information about the girl, she waited patiently. She had just about decided to say something, when the girl fired another question.

“Do you ever find it hard to describe something when you write? Like not being able to explain how exactly some object is or how you actually feel about something?”

Jharnaa thought for a moment and then slowly replied. “Yes, it does happen a lot. I do not find the right word or somehow what I write does not seem enough. It does happen but grandfather says it will get better as I grow older. You see, as I grow older, I will learn more things, more words and all. So, I will be able to express myself better.” Jharnaa’s voice grew enthusiastic as she uttered these last words. Only yesterday, she had shown her diary to grandfather, i.e. whatever she had written in it recently and this is the assurance she had got from him. Although, now that she thought about it, she, unlike this girl, had not expressed any doubts about her writing skills. Nevertheless, grandfather after praising her, had rounded up their conversation with these encouraging words, that with time, she would write even better. Maybe, he had detected flaws in her writing and only encouraged her in the hope that she would keep writing and not give up, under any situation. Jharnaa shrugged more to herself. She

was not unduly worried about this writing ability thing. She would surely learn more, practice more and therefore improve further, as she grew older.

Hence, she decided to impart the same assurance to this girl. “Well, sometimes you have to mix up certain colours to get different shades. Depending on how much you use of a given colour, you will get different strengths of the resulting shade and so on.” Jharnaa’s voice had trailed off towards the end of this lecture as she sensed that all this information must surely be known to the girl in front of her. However, to the girl’s credit, she neither cut short Jharnaa’s monologue , nor did the expression on her face undergo any change.

After a while, she finally spoke. “Yes, I agree with you, but have you ever noticed how colours keep changing all the time? Also, there seem to be so many shades in nature, which you never see in any painting, no matter how great the artist who has painted it. It as if they just select some of the major shades and omit all those in between. It is very annoying and yet when I try to capture the whole thing myself, I too never get it right. So, then I kind of understand as why it is so. It *is* difficult to capture the entire range as seen in nature.”

Jharnaa once again felt the need to reassure the girl that things will improve with age and practice but even as she uttered these words, she felt their futility. There was something in the demeanour of this girl, which rendered such cliched advice, as redundant. How old could she be, Jharnaa wondered. Maybe a couple of years older to herself but she seemed wiser than her years. In a strange way, this girl was both fascinating and intimidating in Jharnaa’s eyes.

Discouraged as Jharnaa was ,with the continuing absence of any information forthcoming from this stranger, she still decided to risk a simple question. Her instinct told her that she might get an answer to this one.

“It seems you like colours very much. What is your favourite colour?”

If Jharnaa had consciously tried to change the girl’s mood, she couldn’t have asked a better question. In an instant, the girl’s mood changed. From a serious, thoughtful look, her face became amazingly animated, as she talked on about the various colours which she loved. In fact, she had no favourite colour at all, Jharnaa deduced. She liked and was too engrossed with the multiple shades, available in nature around her, to pinpoint one particular hue ,as the esteemed one. She went from blue to green to orange and, it seemed to Jharnaa, beyond the spectrum itself as she raved about how unique each shade was and how she could never reproduce on paper, what she obviously so enjoyed, feasting her eyes on.

Jharnaa let the girl talk on. It seemed to make her happy and Jharnaa was more than happy to observe and listen than contribute anything to stem the conversation. Maybe it was also

curiosity on her part and some deep rooted instinct guided her that the only way she could elicit something from this girl was, if she was allowed to talk unhindered.

So these two girls who hardly knew much about each other spent the whole afternoon talking or at least one of them talked while the other listened and there was no doubt that something like friendship had grown up between them.

Jharnaa had completely forgotten about the rest of her family on the other side of their shaded spot. So, she was almost surprised when her mother's voice came floating by, asking her where she was and that she should hurry up as it was time to go.

Reluctantly, she stood up to go. Her new friend also stood up as if to bid her farewell. As the two girls looked at each other, Jharnaa blurted out a question.

The most expected question would obviously have been to ask her new friend's name and where she lived. However, that is not what Jharnaa wanted to know.

"You said my name Jharnaa is strange. What is so strange about it?"

The girl smiled gently, and her answer was as intriguing as she herself was.

"Jharnaa means a mass of water that is falling over a hill. Isn't it? You don't seem like that. There is a placidity in you, more like a lake. Not a tumbling waterfall, eager to get somewhere, but a still mass of water which is happy being where it is. Also the lights play so maddeningly when it falls on the falling water. So many shades again and changing all the time. Very hard to capture if you are trying to paint it." The girl's voice had again trailed off dreamily as she came to the end of this little monologue."

Having the spent the whole afternoon discussing colours and the complexities of getting the right shades, it should not have surprised Jharnaa, but the girl managed to do exactly that. She had always loved her name though she had never given a thought, as to whether it suited her or not. She might have stood there listening to her fascinating new friend but her mother's summon was now getting more urgent and Jharnaa turned away to go back.

The girl however, had a last comment to make before she was ready to let Jharnaa go.

"*Jheeli*. That should be your name. At least I will call you that. My new friend Jheeli because she is so very like a lake, the word for lake in Hindi!" The girl's voice had a gentle laughter in it as she imparted this parting gift.

Before Jharnaa could say something to this, the girl had another question for her. "And what will you call me ,Jheeli?"

“Isn’t that obvious? You love colours so much. I will call you *Rangaa*. From the Hindi word *Rang*, meaning colour.” Jharnaa quipped, flashing a bright smile to her friend before turning back and running to her mother.

That night she wrote about Rangaa in her diary. She described in detail, not only Rangaa’s looks but also the things she had said. The fact that she had no clues to her actual name or any other details whatsoever, did not at all bother Jharnaa. She felt a deep intimacy with this girl. She was both familiar and yet wildly exotic in her own way. She also liked the name ,Rangaa had given her. Jheeli, now that Rangaa had named her so, oddly seemed apt. Her imaginative mind also could not help but note as how fitting it was, that having come to *Jheelpukur*, she should end up being named after a lake. Yes, it was right, she wrote in her diary. I am as much *Jheeli*, as she is *Rangaa*.

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Jharnaa had been afraid that her meeting with Rangaa that day would be the first and also the last for her. However, fate proved to be kinder to these two friends than Jharnaa had dared hope. The particular picnic spot where they had gone that day ,was luckily not that far away and Jheelpukur, being a quiet and more or less trouble-free place, Jharnaa could actually venture out on walks all by herself, once in a while. Of course, she was sensible enough to know that she must not stray for too long and only during broad daylight. Sometimes, she simply accompanied her grandfather for a walk and when he sat down for a brief rest, she would drift away for a brief walk by herself. She had no way to contact Rangaa, so she was simply taking a chance in visiting that spot and hoping that her friend would turn up. However, to Jharnaa’s delight, she was disappointed but only a couple of times. Most of the times, Rangaa usually turned up and once she even appeared near the lake, when Jharnaa was sitting with her grandfather. Her first reaction was to call out to her but Rangaa had a distracted look in her eyes and did not catch her eye, so that before Jharnaa could say something, she had moved on.

Disappointed for a moment, Jharnaa was also a trifle relieved. She couldn’t have given a reason for it but for some reason, she wanted to keep Rangaa and her friendship with her, a secret. A shy girl herself, she was usually proud to be able to introduce her friends to her family. It seemed to reassure her that she could make friends and by an odd child’s instinct, she sensed that it pleased and reassured her mother too that her little girl was getting along well.

However, none of these mattered when it came to Rangaa. This friendship had a hint of mystery about it and Jharnaa wished to keep it that way. The fact was that though the two girls talked a lot, yet Jharnaa had never ventured to even ask her name or where she lived for that matter! As if these mundane details like, name, address or even family background did not seem to matter much, when it came to Rangaa. To Jharnaa, she was just Rangaa, a wild, exotic

creature who immensely loved the natural world around her. Not just the beauty of it but also the changeability of this force, that was nature. She was awed and fascinated by it and conveyed some of it to her faithful friend, who was content to listen, observe and later jot down all her precious impressions in that little namesake diary at home. Colours were the paramount source of fascination for Rangaa and Jharnaa too developed a special love for them. However, sometimes she felt like she wasn't seeing what Rangaa talked about. She vaguely wondered if Rangaa really saw more colours in everything around them than she or anyone else did. Child as she was, she could not help wondering if Rangaa actually had different eyes! Big, brown and almond-shaped were Rangaa's eyes, although owing to Rangaa's own influence, Jharnaa would not have described the shade in so simple terms, anymore. Instead, she would have said that Rangaa's eyes was a motley of different shades of brown, approaching brownish black, though not quite achieving that undiluted blackness, so often described as the Indian eye colour. She had brought it up with Rangaa once and her answer had surprised her.

"Nothing in nature is actually pure black, Jheeli. What we often describe as black is actually in most cases, a dark jumble of brown, deep blue and other dark shades, which give an appearance of pitch black. Anything, which absorbs most of the light falling on it and reflects back very little, ends up looking black to us.", Rangaa had explained to her.

Jharnaa had been intrigued with her answer and later questioned Shekhar about it. The question had interested her intelligent cousin and bowing to his scientific temperament, he had researched it further. Rangaa's answer, unconventional as it was, was not completely wrong. Rather, it could be said, that as per the technicalities of optics and known scientific facts, she did have a point. Black was not actually completely black. Black was simply the name we gave to it. Shekhar had actually laughed and said maybe the same was true for the other colours too. We saw something based on how the input from our eyes was processed by our brains. There was no way of knowing how much of that input actually got filtered out or modified, for brain to be able to reach a tangible image that we finally described as 'seeing'! All this was profoundly interesting to Jharnaa.

Such was the impact of this friendship that not only was Rangaa teaching her to appreciate her surroundings more, but she was also inadvertently helping to develop a keen sense of scientific curiosity in her friend's mind.

'Jharnaa' the namesake diary, was of course the faithful chronicler of all these precious conversations, discoveries and perceptions which the girl Jharnaa's interactions with her friend, resulted in. However, soon 'Jharnaa' the diary was to get a companion. Her new companion was a colouring book, which Jharnaa had started recently. It had again been a gift from ever thoughtful grandfather, who had gifted the same to all three of his youngest grandchildren. While Appu and Pappu's colouring books had single, big objects already sketched on their

pages, ready to be coloured, Jharnaa's book just comprised of blank, white sheets. The box of colours and paintbrushes also that Jharnaa got ,were of course more grown-up like in comparison to the packet of pastel tubes that the younger kids got. Obviously, grandfather expected her to dabble in proper sketching and painting, using water colours. The gift, more than thrilled Jharnaa, as she took to mixing various colours in different proportions ,to arrive at different shades which she then proceeded to apply to the sketched objects to get the most realistic creations of the said object. Rangaa's comments on colours and hues constantly rang in her ears as she struggled to achieve that exact shade which she thought the object should have. It both fascinated and exasperated her to try to get this right. Still, Jharnaa was happier now, engaged as she was in her twin hobbies of writing and colouring, than she had been in the last two and half years.

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It was but inevitable that Jharnaa should share her new-found gift with her dear friend. So, one day, she diligently packed her paintings, her box of colours, paint brushes and all, in a bag and went in search of Rangaa. She had met her two days before and they had promised to meet at the same spot by the little stream. Jharnaa reached first and settled down on the ground to wait. To pass the time, she took out her colouring book and started flipping through the pages. She had no grand illusions about her artistic ability, but she did feel she had made significant improvements in her colouring lately. She was trying to capture a greater range of shades than before and she hoped to show her work to Rangaa. She hoped to be able to pleasantly surprise her friend and waited impatiently for her to arrive.

However, despite watching out for her, she was still taken by surprise to see that her friend had not only arrived but was already peering over her shoulders, looking at the painting she was presently gazing at. This was another one of Rangaa's characteristics that never ceased to amaze Jharnaa. She seemed to appear out of nowhere, so quietly and stealthily did she move. As usual, her face was serious as she looked at the painting open on Jharnaa's lap. It was the painting of a bunch of fruits in a bowl and to Jharnaa it looked wildly colourful and pretty. However, one look at Rangaa's face, as she studied it, damped Jharnaa's enthusiasm as she realized that not only was she unimpressed but almost contemptuous of the attempt.

Still, she put on a bright smile on her face and patted the space beside her, inviting Rangaa to sit down beside her.

“Hi Rangaa! Where have you been? I have been waiting for ages. See, what I brought. Here are my paintings which I told you about. Come, I will show you. You can tell me which one you like the best. Maybe I can gift that to you.” Jharnaa chattered on happily.

Rangaa quietly sat down and started flipping the pages. She looked carefully at each one and finally looked up at Jharnaa.

“The sketches are quite good, Jheeli.”

Rangaa’s response really disappointed Jharnaa’s young heart. The first reason for that was that Rangaa had chosen to comment only on the sketching and not even mentioned the colouring. Colouring was primarily what she had been hoping to impress Rangaa with. In fact, hearing her sketches praised, she felt a little embarrassed because in many cases, the sketches were not even completely her own. She had attempted sketching on her own but soon discovered that though she could do quite a decent job, her cousin Shekhar had a more natural hand when it came to sketch. So, she had requested him to sketch many of the pieces ,while she had concentrated on the colouring. She was almost on the verge of confessing this when Rangaa blurted out.

“It is the same with every painting I see. A dearth of colours! Almost every painter prefers to just choose a handful of shades. They miss out so much. It makes me wonder. Can’t they see all those other colours or do they just give up because it is so difficult?”

Jharnaa did not know what to say. To see the truth, she was a little peeved too. She had not expected to be described as a painting genius but a modicum of warm appreciation, she had definitely hoped for! Maybe because she was hurt, her next words came out like a challenge. Thrusting the book forward, which still had some blank pages in it, she said in a hard tone.

“You seem to know so much about colours. Why don’t you try yourself? Let me see how many more shades you are able to capture!”

“Me? Well, I do paint sometimes but...” Rangaa’s voice trailed off.

Jharnaa however, was now quite decided. She flipped to one of the pages, which had a sketch of a bunch of flowers in a vase on it. She placed her finger on it and spoke to Rangaa. “Here, this sketch is still not painted. Why don’t you do it and show it to me later? Maybe after two days?” Jharnaa’s voice, usually so soft, had a determined sound to it ,that brooked no argument.

Perhaps Rangaa too sensed it and having realized that she had somehow offended her friend’s enthusiasm, didn’t speak for a few moments. Finally, when she did agree to try, her voice

sounded oddly skeptical to Jharnaa's ears. Despite her overt enthusiasm about colours, maybe she was actually not very sure about her ability to reproduce it!

However, the decision had been made. The girls spent some more time together, talking about inconsequential things, after which Jharnaa left. She had handed over her bag to Rangaa, with all her tools of colouring in it, so that she could carry out the commission that had been entrusted to her. Jharnaa had earlier hoped that not only would they look over the paintings together, they would also do some colouring together. That is why, not only had she brought the book but also the paint bottles and brushes, along with a rag to clean the brushes and even a small tumbler and palette for the mixing of colours. Instead, Rangaa's dismissal of her earlier attempts had put a dampener on her excitement. Nevertheless, as she made her way back to her home, she could not help but wonder as how Rangaa would perform. Would her painting be decidedly more colourful and lovelier or would she discover to her chagrin that she was no better than the so-called other painters she looked down upon?

As she kept walking, she kept playing all the instances of her conversations with Rangaa in the past one month. Rangaa would very often say something like "Look at the light on the water – can you see the pink shimmering across that rock? Can you see the red on the edge of that leaf there?" when Jharnaa would see nothing out of the ordinary. A couple of times, Jharnaa would confess her inability to spot the shade Rangaa was gushing over. Immediately, a flicker of disappointment would appear in Rangaa's eyes, making Jharnaa feel like she had let her friend down. Inherently honest herself, Jharnaa rarely ever lied but even she, had at times found herself nodding politely as if she could see what Rangaa was talking about, when her vision had caught nothing special. It made her feel like she was no better than the silly, gullible emperor or the townspeople described in the children's fairy tale 'Emperor's new clothes', where everyone pretended to be able to see the wonderful clothes for the fear of being considered foolish!

Yet some deep instinct inside Jharnaa kept assuring her that Rangaa's comments had been absolutely sincere. There wasn't a mean bone in her friend. She would never intentionally hurt Jharnaa. Just as her fascination with the beauty around her was a genuine thing, so had been her spontaneous disappointment at discovering that her beloved friend did not exactly see the world as it appeared to *her*.

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Next day was photography day at the Chakraborty residence. Grandfather had declared that they would have some family photographs taken and later, if the kids behaved, they would also

be allowed to click some pictures themselves. Appu and Pappu were of course wildly excited at the delectable prospect of handling that oddly shaped, black coloured appliance that grandfather described as 'camera'.

Even Shekhar seemed to be mildly amused. The kids, all belonging to the cellphone generation, photography to them, was a matter of clicks on a mobile phone and perhaps some editing later on. However, when it came to grandfather, there was no question that an old-fashioned camera, held at the most obscure angles and demanding a lot of stillness and patience from those it was meant to capture, was the only weapon of choice. A good number of photographs were clicked that day. In fact, Shekhar was given the run of the camera for few more days and good use he made of it. He practically clicked anything and everything that caught his fancy. The film roll once exhausted, was finally surrendered at a nearby photo studio for the hard copies. The studio was prompt in its service and the very next day, the desired hard copies were available for all to gaze at.

It was a novel experience, flipping through all the photographs when they had been duly washed and delivered from the studio. Grandfather had been indulgent. He had kept his promise to the excited twins and even had the careless shots, taken by them, printed. So, there was a plethora of photos circulating in the house right now. Not only were there conscious poses by various members of the family but also candid and unpoised shots of both people and other objects for all to enjoy.

Shekhar had gone one step ahead and clicked thoughtful photos of various inanimate objects also that had caught his fancy. So, there were vases with flowers that Madhuri had lovingly decorated the family dining room with, along with bowls of luscious fruits adorning the table in the same room. Some outdoor pictures were also there, an unknown tree spreading its branches towards the sky or a beautiful blue jay bird, sitting placidly by the lake.

As if a riot of images and colours had been unleashed on Jharnaa's senses and she could not help but love it. Keeping with her new-found appreciation for the hobby of painting, she found herself comparing many of the things, she had recently painted, with their corresponding photographs. Every time she did so, she discovered as how both similar and yet dissimilar the renderings were in each case. A photograph seemed to be able to capture a certain depth which her manual colouring could hardly match, she found herself realizing.

This was also the day when she had planned to meet Rangaa. So, after lunch, when most people in the house were enjoying an after-lunch siesta, Jharnaa slipped out to meet Rangaa.

This time, she was not taken by surprise for Rangaa was already seated at the spot when Jharnaa reached. She was huffing a little, when she arrived, as she had started a little later than

planned and had therefore walked quickly for the last leg of her journey, some of which involved uphill terrain. Still, she was glad to see Rangaa and returned her smile, as she sat down beside her friend.

“Hey Jheeli, you can slow down dear. There is no hurry.” Rangaa said. “Though I must say, this huffing and puffing has given your cheeks a delightful colour. It’s a lovely shade of brownish pink! There she goes, Jharnaa thought indulgently. Another of those intriguing comments about colour! Brownish pink, now that is a colour I am curious to see! Wonder how it looks like, she found herself thinking. Jharnaa had the warm, wheatish-brown complexion that passes for fair ,with regard to the Indian skin tone. Not the milky white skin tone that a native of the cold lands would call fair but rather a coffee-with-lots-of-milk hue that combined both brown and white in disproportionate amounts. This skin tone, though a lovely one, does not lend itself to the wide range of blushes as a milky white skin would. Yet, Rangaa had come up with a comment about its unique brownish pink tinge and despite herself, Jharnaa was pleased by the compliment.

After chatting for a few minutes, Jharnaa came to the point. She demanded to see the painting Rangaa had been asked to complete. Wordlessly, Rangaa complied. Her eyes too had the same mixture of eagerness and apprehension that any artist feels when her work comes under someone else’s glance for the first time. Would Jharnaa be impressed, or would she scoff at her feeble attempts, her eyes seemed to be asking!

It took Jharnaa a full minute before she was able to take in the painting that had been placed in front of her. To describe the painting as colourful, was an understatement. A riot of colours and shades was more like it. As if Rangaa had not just mixed and matched a handful of colours to arrive at a range of shades but attempted to recreate the whole spectrum in that one painting. Yet, on minute observation, Jharnaa realized that there was a pattern or rather direction to all this onslaught of varied tones. The shades, though so numerous still had a flowing and converging quality about them. As if they were approaching steadily from one end of the colour spectrum to the other, unless punctuated by bursts of both similar and opposing shades. It was beautiful, but not in a serene way, as most pictures are. Rather the colours and the very theme of the painting, seemed to be about to leap off the page. You almost expected to see the bunch of flowers and leaves sway in the gentle breeze or be able to stretch out and hold the solid body of the colourful vase!

Rangaa was still eyeing her friend with that eager, apprehensive look. Jharnaa did not need to say anything. When she finally looked up and met Rangaa’s eyes, her admiration and surprise were clearly etched in her own black eyes. Rangaa visibly relaxed and laughed.

“For a moment I thought you didn’t like it.” Rangaa said.

“Like it? I don’t know what to say. I have never seen anything like it. I bet the actual vase and flowers which my cousin sketched, did not have so many colours as your painting has. But it is amazing. Really beautiful!” Jharnaa gushed.

She had hoped to placate her friend by her last words for a strange, surprised light had come into Rangaa’s eyes when Jharnaa had made her first comment.

“did not have so many colours? But I only tried to recreate what I saw.” Was Rangaa’s comment in a wondering voice.

Before Jharnaa could comment, the other girl elaborated. “Of course, I could not see the actual vase and its contents, which your cousin had sketched. So, I went flower picking and put them in a similar vase we had at home and painted from that. In fact, I did not get it right the first few times. This final one, I felt, was the closest to what it actually was like.” Rangaa explained. Her voice had a note of perplexity in it.

Now that Jharnaa had mentioned, Rangaa realized that the paper she was holding in her hand, was actually not the page she had pointed out to her friend the other day. It was a loose sheet that Rangaa had handed her when she had demanded to see her work. To avoid the disappointed look in her friend’s eyes, she hurriedly opened the original drawing book and found Shekhar’s sketch in it. Yes, that too was painted but it had an unfinished look about it, as if the painter had got dissatisfied with it and moved on to try afresh. However, like the final work, this too had a wildly colourful and multi-shaded aura about it, as if the page and the available range of paints were just not enough to capture the plethora of what the artist was trying to bring about.

Jharnaa, though very young, was more matured than most girls of her age. Her instinct told her that her friend had expected a different reaction and immediately hastened to comfort her with a, what she hoped was a sensitive yet genuine, explanation of her own earlier comment.

“It is very beautiful, Rangaa. It is indeed! It is just that, it is so different from what I expected.” She paused for the fraction of a second and went on again. “Yes, that is what it is, Rangaa. Sometimes, I feel like you have different eyes than the rest of us. As if you see more. More colours, more shades than what others like me do.” Now that she had spelled it out, Jharnaa realized how bang on her comment, was. Rangaa looked thoughtful as if she was considering Jharnaa’s words. She did not seem surprised at Jharnaa’s response but still seemed to be considering the words deeply.

Almost absent-mindedly , she picked up a pebble from the ground where they were sitting and gazed at it. It was just an ordinary grey pebble, with a smooth, rounded appearance. Suddenly, she held it up in front of Jharnaa’s eyes and asked a question.

“How does this pebble look to you, Jheeli?”

Jharnaa was surprised but by now, she was used to abrupt changes in their conversations, so she replied almost instantaneously. “Why, this is just an ordinary pebble. Grey in colour but I like the round shape. Also the surface is really smooth. Like someone has polished it.” Jharnaa answered taking the pebble in her hand.

“Grey! Is that all you see? Don’t you see all the bright colours?” I could paint it and you would see then”, came Rangaa’s reply.

Jharnaa gave a chuckle. “You are blessed, Rangaa. To be able to see bright, beautiful colours where rest of us see only a dull grey, must be indeed wonderful.”

“Yes, it is beautiful but sometimes it hurts too.” Rangaa replied with a smile, taking the pebble back from Jharnaa. Instead of gazing at it, she covered it up with her other hand and gently closed her eyes. As she sat back with her eyes closed, she had another comment though.

“Do you know what my favourite colour is, Jheeli?”

“Go ahead, tell me. I did ask you this question before and instead of giving a clear cut answer, you described all the colours in the world to me. With so many wonderful colours to choose from, I wonder which one you actually like most, Rangaa.” Jharnaa’s voice had a note of laughter in it.

“White”. Rangaa’s response took Jharnaa by surprise.

“White?...that is really a surprise...” Before Jharnaa could express her surprise completely, Rangaa elaborated her own comment.

“I like white because it is so restful. Calm and peaceful ,like silence.”

This strange response silenced Jharnaa as she tried to absorb this extraordinary comment from her exceptional friend. On an objective level, she couldn’t have processed this information, but her own life’s experiences had imparted a different depth to her perceptions ,that enabled her to appreciate this simple observation. She knew ,how precious and restful silence could be , especially when everything seemed to be changing too fast around you. Maybe, that is how it was with Rangaa. Equipped to see more colours than the average human, she too perhaps needed to rest her eyes sometimes and the only colour, capable of imparting this blessed restfulness, was white. White, with all its starkness and emptiness would seem less challenging, less intruding and therefore a less demanding hue to rest your eyes upon.

“Oh Rangaa!”, Jharnaa whispered softly, “you never fail to surprise me. Here we are going on and on about colours and all the time it is white you like most.” Jharnaa was laughing now, but not with surprise , rather with delight.

She picked up her drawing book and checked the remaining pages. It was almost over. She made a quick decision. “Tomorrow , can you meet me here? I will bring more pages for you and also more colours and paint brushes. You are going to paint more such delightful pictures and I will at least carry some of them back with me, when I finally go back home.”

“Oh don’t be sad Rangaa”, for a slightly wistful look had appeared in Rangaa’s eyes on hearing of the mentioned departure , “You might actually be glad to see me go because from this day onwards , I will not give you a moment’s peace. I will want you to paint practically anything and everything we see. Of course, I will. After all, you are sure to be a great artist some day and then I will be proud to claim you as my dear friend. In fact, I will also be the proud owner of some of your earliest paintings and won’t that be really cool!” Jharnaa’s voice had taken on a delightful excitement as she painted these rosy pictures of the future.

Two young girls, for all their exceptional maturity and talent , were after all, just two little girls, whose childlike and unspoiled outlook still revealed the world to them, in the clearest and brightest of shades! The little grove filled with their animated talk, as the two friends settled down to chat away the afternoon in happy companionship.

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Jharnaa was more than perplexed. She was distressed and actually also a good deal worried. This was so unlike Rangaa. This was the fifth day that Rangaa had not arrived at their designated spot by the little stream. It had increasingly struck Jharnaa in these last few days as how little she actually knew about her new friend.

They had talked and joked for hours , yet when it came to hard facts, Rangaa was a complete stranger to her. For God’s sake, Jharnaa neither knew her real name nor where she lived! Even with respect to Rangaa’s family, she was clueless ,although she did remember her having mentioned her mother a couple of times. Even this reference had always been an oblique one and related to that one topic, which she seemed to talk about the most: colours and her art! She recollected how Rangaa had once said that her mother had been the only one who appreciated her colourful point of view and encouraged her to draw and paint. Now that she pondered over it, she realized that even the few comments that Rangaa had ever made about

her mother had always been in a vague sort of way, as if she was speaking about a person not from her daily life but a figure from the past. Did that mean, she no longer had a mother? The moment the thought crossed her mind, Jharnaa knew her suspicion was right. Her eyes filled with tears as she realized this fundamental fact about her absent friend. Maybe that explained the reticence and the grave, thoughtful expression ,Rangaa often had, in her eyes. Perhaps this was what, both the girls had sensed in each other ,from the very first day, that unconsciously had drawn and bound them together. Two young girls ,who had had to contend with an inevitable loss, very early in life and which had irreversibly coloured their respective personalities. Of course, in Rangaa's case, there had been the added characteristic of her exceptional appreciation for colours in her surroundings.

Jharnaa resolutely brushed away her tears and focused upon her earlier train of thoughts which was as what she actually knew about the girl. Her clothes had always been of good quality, but she could have bet ,none of them were very new, even the pretty ones. There had been an air of hand-me-down about them. Of course, that could mean anything. Perhaps her family had an economizing bend of mind, who believed in using things as long as they lasted, instead of discarding the old stuff too quickly. It could also mean that she was simply a younger sister, in a big family, so that the older clothes of her elder siblings simply fell to her lot as the older ones outgrew them. That could explain the coupling of good quality and prettiness along with the air of their used appearance. Jharnaa's recollections , now aided by her imaginative nature was weaving all kinds of stories about her absent friend. Maybe Rangaa didn't even have a family. Maybe she was just a poor relative , who had to work hard for her keep. As she pondered over it, she realized, it could be true. She remembered how absolutely delighted Rangaa had been when Jharnaa had first handed over her copious painting supplies to her. As if the young girl had been offered the most precious treasure in the whole world!

A feeling of regret washed over Jharnaa. Why had she acted so naïve? Why had she not bothered to collect more hard facts about her friend? Who knows, she might have been able to help her in some way, if she had known more. She had been too young then to realize the answer to that question. The truth was that she had been absolutely mesmerized by Rangaa. Not that there had been anything intimidating about her. Still , the way she could observe things and comment on them or the passion she had for her natural surroundings, specially the colours she could see, had been an overwhelming force that had drowned out the trivialities of their individual lives. For two young girls with such deep and passionate natures, ordinary facts of life, like real names, home addresses or day to day problems had not mattered.

At last Jharnaa stood up. She knew it was no use. Whatever the reason, Rangaa was not coming. It would get dark soon. It was time for Jharnaa to go home. However, she had decided something today. She would come again tomorrow. Not because she had any hope of

encountering Rangaa tomorrow but because there was one last gift that she had to leave for her friend. This quiet, secluded spot ,beside the little mountain stream ,was the only place she could leave it in. Her simple gift would be wrapped in the hope that if Rangaa ever returned here again, she would know and collect her gift.

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Thirteen years later.....

Call from the past

Jharnaa was almost ready. She brushed her hair one more time and reviewed her reflection in the mirror. The eyes that looked back at her ,still had a pensive and far away look in them but there was also a soft smile in them. It was the look of a person who had known sadness and loss early but had slowly, albeit steadily ,outgrown it to become a sensible ,yet joyous person. She would never be the life of any party, but she had developed, what her grandfather had liked to describe as, the capacity for joy. Little, common place things could more easily bring that gentle smile on her lips than the most raucous of jokes. Her mother's voice from the next room called out to her, asking her to hurry up.

Jharnaa picked up her handbag and walked out to join her mother ,who was very much ready by now and raring to leave. The young girl smiled indulgently at her mother. She could very well appreciate her mother's impatience. In Madhuri's eyes, her beloved nephew Shekhar was the epitome of perfection. So what if he had some quirky hobbies! As far as Madhuri *pishi* was concerned, Shekhar could do no wrong and he was always so sweet to her! Hence, any tardiness that could delay their arrival at the photo exhibition gallery was obviously unacceptable to Madhuri. In vain, did Jharnaa try to convince her mother that today being a Sunday, the roads would be less jammed and that they were more likely to be early than late ,for Shekhar's photography exhibition. Madhuri was not in a mood to hear anything. Better be early than late, was her motto right now. What use was family, she demanded ,if they did not rally around ,when one of them was venturing something new. This was an exhibition for Shekhar's photographs, and it was only fitting that they should be early for moral support ,not stroll in lazily towards the end. Jharnaa of course ,playfully pointed out that being the self-assured person Shekhar was, he hardly needed moral support to see his own exhibition through. Madhuri absolutely tut tutted this approach and maintained stoutly that self-assured or not, a show of solidarity, from one's own people always went a long way in prepping someone up.

Throughout their auto ride Jharnaa and her mother kept up this jolly tirade. In her adolescent years, Jharnaa had gone through her quintessential phase of cousin crush, with her handsome cousin Shekhar ,as the idol of her worship. However, she loved to tease both Shekhar and her own mother that it was his Madhuri *pishi* , who had the biggest infatuation on him. She herself still idolized him ,though with the maturity of years, her feelings towards him had deepened into a solid, sisterly affection, with a healthy dose of playfulness. Nevertheless, sister or no sister, she could not deny that Shekhar did indeed have an attractive personality , not just because of his clean-featured good looks but also a dignified ,yet friendly ,demeanor. As one of

her college friends had recently commented on spotting Shekhar, it was downright criminal to be this good looking, without having had to make any conscious effort to appear so.

Jharnaa had shrugged at the comment but she had agreed in her heart. There was a sincerity about him that endeavoured to put everyone at ease. He was also extremely intelligent and hardworking, and the plain truth was that she, like the rest of her family, was immensely proud of her cousin. Like her mother, she was hoping that the exhibition would turn out to be a success. Though only a hobby, Shekhar had always been passionate about photography and this was his first public exhibition.

They had reached by now and were approaching the gallery when they spotted Shekhar. He was talking to someone and spotting them, waved cheerfully at them. Soon, he was walking towards them and after hugging his aunt, escorted them inside. Chatting gaily among themselves, they walked inside the gallery. Shekhar took Madhuri aside to offer her some fruit juice, while Jharnaa strolled about looking at the photographs.

She was glad to see that, early as it was, there were already some visitors, doing the same. She walked about, taking her time to look at the pictures when something caught her eye. So surprised was she that she halted abruptly and stood still for a couple of seconds. Every picture on display was an exquisite work of art, for Shekhar really had a good eye for light and colour but the one that had caught her attention, had done so, for a completely different reason.

The picture was a simple one, of a young girl, with her head bent thoughtfully over a diary, in which she appeared to be writing and had barely lifted her face to the camera. It was obvious that she had been completely absorbed in her task, when framed in the camera lens, and therefore had registered the fact only after the click had been taken. There was but the slightest hint of surprise in her dark black eyes. Jharnaa gazed at it in fascination. The face had undergone a good deal of change of course, in the last thirteen years but the eyes were the same. The ones that looked back at her every single time when she looked in the mirror. It was she, in her nine-year-old self, during that golden vacation in Jheelpukur, all those years back! Memories flooded her as she remembered that trip. The diary, captured in the photograph was of course none other than "Jharnaa", the first repository of her writings and the girl caught in the frame, none other than that scared child who had been struggling to put her unhappy loss behind her. She could not have explained why she was so mesmerized, but she stood perfectly still, drinking in the perfect proportions of light and shade of the picture in front of her.

"Amazing, isn't it?" Jharnaa turned around to see Shekhar standing behind her. In his hands, he was holding two chilled glasses of orange juice, one of which he now handed to her, as he proceeded to sip from his own. Jharnaa did not answer. She took a deep sip from her own juice and turned to look at the picture again. After a few minutes, she finally spoke.

“It brings back a lot of memories. That was a delightful vacation. “

“Yes, it was.” Shekhar agreed, “maybe because it was also the last one, we ever had there. Of course, for you it was both the first and the last.”

After a brief pause, he went on. “There were other photographs too from that vacation. Remember, the shooting spree we all went on, with Grandpa’s old camera! Some really funny shots are there too. But somehow, I did not feel like including any others for this exhibition. However, this one I could not hold back. It looked so perfect somehow.”

He was again looking at the picture.

Jharnaa nodded her understanding. She moved closer to read the title. It was “The transformation”. She turned to look at Shekhar.

“Others may not understand the name, *dada*.”

Shekhar shrugged slightly.

“Maybe, but those of us, who could see you, could spot the change distinctly. Jheelpukur was the place where you finally put the past behind you and started becoming the girl we know now. You finally became part of our family too. I am sure the beauty of Jheelpukur had a lot to do with it.” Shekhar said softly, looking intently at her.

Jharnaa knew he was right. Yes, Jheelpukur definitely had played its part. But then, so had grandfather’s wisdom, the special gift he had given her, the twin hobbies of writing and painting that she had discovered and last but not the least, a secret special friendship.....

She still had those paintings which Rangaa had done for her, before she disappeared from Jharnaa’s life.....

Yet, despite the abrupt ending to that special friendship, the vacation had healed something inside her. It had set her on track for her future life.

Still, there was a sense of incompleteness about it, which sometimes saddened her.

She would have liked to meet Rangaa again. What other lovely pictures she could have drawn and painted? What would she have thought about the gift that Jharnaa had left behind for her friend, beside that stream? Was her offering swept away by elements or picked up by some careless passerby who happened to discover the same spot? All these questions had kept Jharnaa awake many a night, until, like many a childhood dream, she had firmly let them go. Only those pictures, she had held on to. They were still there, neatly filed away, in a folder, she had coaxed out of her father. However, that carefully filed folder itself, was now relegated to

one of the top shelves of her room, along with many other forgotten knickknacks of her childhood.

As Shekhar said, she had been busy in her own journey of life. Growing up, adopting the family that had adopted her and honing her own skills. It might have been different if she could have visited Jheelpukur again. Maybe the secret meeting spot beside the little stream might have pulled her back but that chapter had closed forever with grandmother's illness the following winter. Having suffered a bad stroke, which she barely recovered from, her children had decided that the prudent thing was to close down the house in Jheelpukur and move the elderly people with one of them. So, grandfather and grandmother had eventually, with a heavy heart, left their abode in Jheelpukur and moved in with their elder son's family in the city. As the years went by, Jheelpukur had receded more and more into the realms of distant memory ,as first grandmother and later grandfather also died.

The memories lingered, fragrant as they were ,with the sweetness of shared happiness, family warmth and of course the unspoiled country fresh beauty of the place itself but the family had never gathered there again for a vacation. That phase was over and done with when grandfather and grandmother changed their postal address. This picture now suddenly brought it all back for Jharnaa in a bitter-sweet way.

Perhaps Shekhar sensed this about her , so he too quietly moved away, leaving her to contemplate the past in silence. Moreover, the gallery was filling up now, as more and more people started pouring in and Shekhar had his host duties to perform.

Jharnaa was left alone in her cocoon of her memories and that special picture that had brought it all back to her. Little did she know that she was not the only one whose fancy and curiosity had been awakened by this captured moment on display!

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Slice of the past

It was almost a week after the exhibition when the surprise came.

Jharnaa had just returned home when her phone rang. It was Shekhar. Depositing her college bag on her study table, she sat down in the easy chair in her balcony in a relaxed manner, preparing herself for a long chat with her cousin. Shekhar was essentially a man of not many words but she always enjoyed her conversations with him.

“Hi, Shekhar, da, how are you?”

“I am good, Jharnaa. Where are you now? Already home?”

“Yes, just got back from college.”

“Oh good. Do you think, you can meet me at the Roshan’s café right away, say in another 15 mins or so? It should not take you very long to get there, I believe.”

Jharnaa was a little surprised at this abrupt plan but she trusted Shekhar so agreed that it would be quite all right. She couldn’t keep from asking though, “What is it Shekhar da? Something urgent?”

Perhaps, Shekhar read the concern in her voice and sought to reassure her immediately that everything was fine. In fact, he went on in a playful manner. “Well, I have got something here , which might surprise you. So, meet me quickly and I will spill the beans.”

Playful as her relationship with her older cousin was, Jharnaa was still a little mystified. However, she decided to get going instead of lingering on the phone further. So, promising to meet him in another twenty minutes, she cut off the call. None of her parents were at home that moment. She quickly, picked up the college bag , which she had a few minutes back placed on the table and taking out her books and notebooks out of it, proceeded to go. She tarried a few minutes in front of the mirror to give her voluminous black curls a quick brush and quickly freshen her lipstick. Having satisfied herself that the clothes ,she had worn to her college ,were good enough for a quick impromptu visit with Shekhar, she set out.

She quickly found an autorickshaw and was at the café within fifteen minutes. The café was not very crowded at this moment and she quickly spotted Shekhar at a corner table. However, she was a little surprised to find him not alone ,but sitting with another man, whose back was to her. Shekhar spotted her at the same time as she did and waved at her to join them. She walked over to the table and sat beside Shekhar.

Then she turned her head to look at Shekhar's companion and was surprised to see him looking very intently at her. Immediately, Jharnaa felt very conscious. Suddenly the pink frilly blouse and black skirt ,that she had worn to her college that day, felt very shabby. She found herself wishing that she had taken some pains to dress a little better or perhaps apply a little more make up ,before arriving for this meeting.

By nature , Jharnaa was not too vain ,although as a young and pretty college student, she was not completely unaware or unused to attention from the opposite sex. Still, there was something about this stranger which made her feel very conscious. To begin with, she found him rather good looking. Though seated, it was obvious that he was of a tall and wiry appearance. His complexion was a healthy brown and his features, though nothing extraordinary, had a sharp and angular quality about them, which leant his face a sort of intelligence, not so common. He was plain and yet not so plain. The second reason for her discomfort was his intent gaze. He was looking at her so carefully as if trying to burn each and every feature of her face into his memory forever. Then he took a deep breath that felt more like a sigh. This went on for a couple of seconds until Shekhar coughed discreetly. Both Jharnaa and the stranger were jolted out of their daze by the sound of Shekhar's cough and turned their eyes away from each other.

To hide her embarrassment and pretend indifference, Jharnaa resolutely looked at her cousin's face. She could not fail to glimpse the hint of amusement in Shekhar's eyes and was irritated for a second but smiled to herself the next moment. Of course Shekhar *da* would spot, she sighed in exasperation. Her cousin was not only deeply observant but also knew her too well to be fooled. She was also sure she had blushed in the most embarrassing way for anyone with functioning eyes to miss. She was feeling strangely confused herself but also wanted to laugh at the whole situation.

However, Shekhar decided to take matters into his own hands at this point. First, he ordered coffee for all three of them.

"Well Jharnaa, you got here rather more quickly than we expected. We were thinking we will have to drink quite a no. of cups of coffee by ourselves, before you finally materialized. I can see you have not even changed your dress. I do realize how inconsiderate it is ,to not allow sufficient time for a pretty girl to get ready and all. So, please forgive me, senorita!"

Jharnaa swatted Shekhar's hand playfully at this ridiculous speech and Shekhar laughed.

Even the stranger smiled and no doubt, embarrassed by his own intent staring earlier, pretended to drink from a glass of water ,with a little too much concentration. Jharnaa decided that he had a rather nice, if little shy , kind of smile.

Shekhar was speaking again.

“I am sure you are dying to know what could be so important so as to drag you at such short notice. Well, I will not keep you in suspense any longer. I will let Nalin speak. By the way, this is Nalin Ghosh. He gave me quite a surprise few days back and now we are about to spring the same on you.”

Shekhar looked at the said Nalin, as if encouraging him to take over the reins. He hesitated only for a second and then took possession of the situation. A file had been lying beside him on his seat. He now picked it up and took out a laminated sheet of portrait sized paper and placed it on the table between them. The lamination seemed new enough, but the paper looked old, as it was slightly yellowed and curled around its edges. The paper seemed to be of the ordinary variety, found in the children’s drawing books, found in most stationery shops. It was the portrait of a young girl that looked up at Jharnaa as she set eyes on it.

Whatever, Jharnaa might have expected, this was definitely not it. The portrait looking back at her was her own. There could be no doubt about that. The same eyes, the same lean, but not too sharp nose and most importantly, the soft way of smiling that she instinctively knew was her own! However, it was not a picture of her present self but belonged in the past. Once again, it was a glimpse of her past. A slice of that one tantalizing vacation that she had enjoyed at Jheelpukur all those years back. A hand drawn sketch of her nine-year old self and coloured most vividly.

Forgotten was her previous embarrassment. All she could think of now, was that there was only one person who could have captured her at that age and with this vividness of colours. She picked up the picture and looking up, stared from Shekhar to Nalin and back to Shekhar. Her eyes seemed to be asking as how and where this had surfaced. Shekhar in his turn, looked at Nalin as if asking him to speak up. He did and what he said surprised Jharnaa even more.

“I have had this picture for the last thirteen years but did not know whose portrait it was. I didn’t even know if it was of a real girl or just something an artist has drawn from his imagination. Then last week, I joined my friend to visit Shekhar’s photo exhibition and seeing a photograph of the same girl, was taken aback. There could be no doubt that it was the same girl. So, I contacted Shekhar and showed him this picture. I wanted to contact the girl and share this with her. I am nothing artistic myself but guess, I was curious to see the muse who had inspired this picture, I have been holding on to, for all these years.”

“Where did you find it?” Jharnaa asked in a breathless voice.

“Thirteen years back, I went to a hill station called Jheelpukur, for a short stay. My maternal grandmother lived there. Usually, I went there with my parents every summer but that year, my

paternal grandfather had broken his leg. Mother was finding me and my younger brother quite a handful along with her extra household duties. Also, with my grandfather laid up, my parents could not travel that year, so the two of us were sent by ourselves. We were not there for very long. Just the last week of the summer vacation. Anyway, I and my brother used to play by ourselves along the hills and one day, we discovered this small grove of trees, with a little stream flowing in it. It became a favourite spot of mine. I kept coming there ,even alone sometimes and one morning, I found this there. It was nestled between an ordinary drawing book. I initially thought someone must have forgotten it but when I came to the spot later, it was still lying there. So, I just took it away. All these years, I have wondered about it.”

He stopped and looked at her carefully as if expecting her to say something but Jharnaa’s face was inscrutable. She was not even looking surprised, but he could sense a restlessness in her, as she took in his words.

“I actually went back to that place almost every day, for the remaining days of my visit but no one ever came , at least during my presence, to claim it. So, when I left Jheelpukur , I took this away with me. I have had this all these years. Then, when I saw that photograph in the exhibition that day, I just had to know. So, I got in touch with Shekhar then and well...”

His voice trailed off leaving the thought unspoken.

“and well, as they say, rest is history. However, what I would like to know as what exactly the history is here.” Shekhar completed the thought in his clear, no-nonsense voice.

There was silence for a couple of minutes , as both Nalin and Shekhar looked at Jharnaa, expecting her to say something. Obviously, she held the key to this mystery, and they looked to her to enlighten them. However, Jharnaa still seemed lost in her thoughts and when she finally spoke, it was a in a very quiet , though measured voice that came out. Stunned she had been a little while ago but there was no confusion or hesitation in her voice now.

“Yes, it is my picture all right. Back when I was nine years old. I had gone to Jheelpukur for summer vacation and there I too had discovered this place you just described. We had originally gone for a family picnic nearby and then I had wandered off by myself and found this spot. There I had met a girl , of about same age as me. Maybe, she was a couple of years older than me but we had just hit it off instantly. Like , you know, when you just meet someone and feel like you are the best of friends. Maybe, our young age too had something to do with it. We were both simple, uncomplicated creatures back then and we found a lot to talk about. Rangaa, this friend of mine was unique in the way she saw the world. Almost as if she had special eyes. She loved colours but what I always felt was that she actually saw more colours than ordinary people do.”

Here she broke off to look at her two companions, as if she was afraid that they would find her words odd. However, they were both listening very intently to her. None of them looked like they had any intention of interrupting her. So, she continued her story.

“Yes, Rangaa was special. She loved to draw and paint and I gave her all my painting supplies. She painted many pictures, which I still have.”

Jharnaa paused as she was now coming to the end of her story and was not sure how it would be received. She also seemed a little uneasy in continuing her tale.

“Then one day, she just disappeared. I mean, for several days at a stretch, she did not come, and I had no idea where to find her or if something had happened to her. Then on the last day, I left a letter and some gifts for her at the same location. I hoped that she would sooner or later come there and find all that I wanted her to have.”

Jharnaa paused at this point. She was no longer looking at the two men sitting opposite to her. Instead, she seemed withdrawn, both of her hands fidgeting restlessly in her lap. “I never met Rangaa again. As I said, the very next day, we left Jheelpukur. I never went back there and never reconnected with Rangaa again.”

Towards the end of her narrative, she had raised her eyes towards Shekhar, as if asking for his corroboration. Shekhar nodded solemnly and turning to Nalin, confirmed, “Yes, that was our last year at Jheelpukur. The same year, during winter, my grandmother had a severe stroke. She survived but my parents and aunts and uncles were no longer comfortable leaving the two elderly people by themselves anymore. So, once she recovered and was healthy enough to travel, they moved in with us. My father was the eldest son, you see. They spent rest of their lives with us in our home and visiting their other children. My father and uncles did visit Jheelpukur again but only to take care of the closure and sale of the family house. None of us ever went back to Jheelpukur again for staying.”

Nalin listened in silence and nodded. It was a very normal scenario, he realized. Grown-up children set up their lives in a big city where they have jobs. The family home remains like a vacation spot for them but once the old parents die or move in with their kids, the link with the old place gets cut off completely. Specially, when those family homes are in small places like Jheelpukur, with not many job opportunities.

“Rangaa...that is a nice name.”, Nalin muttered thoughtfully, “There is another thing. The drawing book this picture was inside, had Jharnaa written on it but there was a note pinned to the picture, which had another name mentioned. At least, I assumed that was the name of the intended recipient.” At this point, he looked at Jharnaa with a questioning kind of look as if trying to decide whether he should spell it out or not.

“What do you think was the name of the intended recipient?” Jharnaa asked in a challenging tone.

However, she did not wait for Nalin’s reply but supplied the answer herself, albeit in a softer tone now. “Jheeli. Was this the name?”

Nalin did not reply but it was obvious to everyone present that Jharnaa had provided the right name. As if on cue, Nalin went back to his folder and brought out a small piece of paper which he handed wordlessly to Jharnaa. In a childlike handwriting, it had the words “From Rangaa...A gift for Jheeli” written on it.

Jharnaa took the piece of paper in her hand and smiled to herself.

Then looking up, she declared in a strong voice. “I am glad to see this paper but even without it ,I would have known that the picture has been painted by Rangaa. No one else could have painted this picture but Rangaa. Look at it. How bright the colours are! This is how Rangaa’s world was. More colourful, more vivid than what you and I see.”

“But why Jheeli? Why not Jharnaa?” Shekhar wanted to know.

Jharnaa laughed at the question and answered, “That is what she called me. She said I was more like a *Jheel*, a placid lake than *Jharnaa*, which means a waterfall.”

“Hmm! Seems like she was a good judge of character!” Shekhar chuckled.

Jharnaa laughed and even Nalin smiled.

“Rangaa.....a very fitting name then I must say, she had. As you say, she has quite a sense of colour, didn’t she?” Nalin commented looking at the pictures.

Jharnaa nodded her head in denial at Nalin’s words. “Oh! That was not her actual name at all. I was the one who gave her that name. I called her Rangaa and she called me Jheeli. I guess it sounds silly. Two girls calling each other by made up names. You will be even more surprised when I tell you that I never knew her actual name at all. To me , she was just Rangaa. Neither she volunteered nor did it ever occur to me to ask as what other people called her.” Jharnaa’s voice had trailed off a little as she made this last disclosure. Undoubtedly, she thought, these men must consider her extremely silly. She did not even know the name of the girl who she claimed had been her friend for almost one full month!

However, none of them voiced any such sentiments.

At least Shekhar spoke up. “Hmmm! Quite interesting. Odd, yes but not unheard of. Children can sometimes be like that. As far as you and your Rangaa were concerned, the mundane

details might not have seemed that important to either of you. Still, she might have told you something more about herself, during your heart to heart chats.”

Slowly, Jharnaa went over the little details , which she could remember but it was obvious that the sum total of all her recollections and perceptions did not amount to much. At least, it was not substantial enough to base one’s search on for the missing Rangaa, for sure. The latter was what Shekhar tentatively seemed to be interested in.

They were all silent for a few minutes. Finally Nalin had a request. “You said, you have more pictures painted by this Rangaa. Would you mind if I wanted to take a look? You are not obliged to ,of course but I must say, I am really intrigued.”

“Yes, Jharnaa, even I am interested. Hope you have not lost all those pictures!” Shekhar piped up too.

“No way, they are all there at house. Although, I must say, I had quite forgotten about them. Nevertheless, I am sure I can locate them quickly enough. In fact, I will do it right away as soon as I get home today.” Jharnaa assured them.

Thoughtful for a moment ,she spoke again in a determined voice.

“What say, Shekhar *da*, why don’t you come home this weekend. I will look up the stuff before then and we can take a look.”

“Of course, Your slightest wish is my command, Senorita!” Shekhar intoned with a mock bow. Jharnaa let out an exasperated laugh and swatted her cousin’s hand playfully.

Shekhar turned to Nalin then. “You will get to see the pictures, Nalin. I promise you that, provided this lovely lady here does not ditch all our hopes. Now , let us all finish our coffee. Drink up, little sis. Restore your energy. You have work to do.”

Though they all laughed and drank their coffee in good natured companionship, Nalin actually was feeling a little bereft. Now that the mystery of the picture had been cleared up, he realized, he would have to give up the picture to Jharnaa, who had been the intended recipient all along. He could express curiosity about the artist’s other work but to hold on to this special picture, he could hardly hope to. The thought made him feel a little desolate.

His mind was brimming with the memories of that long-ago vacation in Jheelpukur. Nalin had been barely twelve years old, going on thirteen, at that time. That year, when he and his brother had travelled alone to visit their maternal grandmother, there had been an odd air of restlessness in their parental home. Though, not privy to the undercurrents of tension in their little household , the young boy had sensed more than his parents had gauged. It was not just

that their mother had been busy and had needed to get the boys off her hands. She and her husband had also been unconsciously seeking to remove them from the disturbed atmosphere ,that had been building up in their home, for quite some time. Ever a sensitive child, Nalin had therefore not complained ,when apprised of the plan to go to Jheelpukur ,for one week and also be responsible for his younger brother, during the visit. Armed with the instinct of adolescence, he had known that this was the best way he could help, to diffuse the tension in their home. Still, the realization, that not all was well back home, had been disturbing for the young boy. The solicitous care of their loving grandmother had helped but Nalin had needed to get away sometimes. That is when he and his brother had found the secluded grove of trees. It had offered a measure of privacy and peace to the boy, especially when he could visit it alone. His brother , being younger and more childish, had not always had the same need for solitude ,as had his troubled adolescent elder brother!

Then one day, he had found this picture. He had obviously thought it had been left behind by someone and would soon be collected. However, when he had seen lying it at the same place , even during his later visit, he had claimed it for his own. The portrait of the girl, the brightness of the colours and the note paper with those simple words, in a child's handwriting ,had all intrigued him, in a mysterious way.

Now, when he reflected back, he realized that the vacation had been a precious one in his life. To begin with, the two brothers had come back to a happier home ,than what they had left behind. The tension ,that had somehow become an undercurrent of their home atmosphere, seemed to have disappeared. As if the very air had been cleansed and all could breathe a purer and fresher air than before. Over the years, Nalin had often wondered about the possible reasons ,for what had created the discomfort in the first place. His suspicions had been neither confirmed nor nullified, as they had never been aired but nevertheless, peace and warmth had returned to their lives and he was grateful for the change. In a superstitious ,as well as romantic vein, he had credited his mystery find in Jheelpukur ,with the return of this simple joy to their little household.

The portrait had been his own delicious little secret ,that he had jealously tucked away ,from the rest of the world. He had wondered about this mysterious Jheeli on sleepless nights and even during his romantic entanglements ,in the growing up years. Slowly, like a graceful but teasing fragrance, the picture , with its warm yet soft tones, had settled into the dust of the marching time! The latter situation had suddenly changed last week, when at the behest of a friend, he had visited the exhibition and spotted the photograph. In a flash, he had known. There could be no doubt about the identification. It was she! His Jheeli! The mystery girl, he had unconsciously been, a little in love with ,all these years.

He realized this as he looked at the girl sitting opposite to him and at this moment, chatting comfortably ,with her cousin. While the picture had been that of a young child, suffused with an inherent naivete and innocence about the face, the artist had still captured the look of known pain and sweetness about the eyes and smile of its subject. The girl in front of him now had laughing eyes but he could still spot the luminous depth ,in those black eyes, laced with gentleness. The sensitive but unsophisticated nine-year old of the painting had grown into a sensible but fun loving young girl.

Nalin sighed quietly to himself. How could he tell these people how special Jheeli had been to him! Now that he had shared his own little secret with them, he would undoubtedly be expected to hand over his possession to Jharnaa. A profound sense of loss washed over him. He wrapped his hands around the warmth of his coffee cup ,to steer away the feeling of desolation. To his disappointment, the coffee was almost gone, so the cup was no longer that warm!

However, there was another kind of warmth , slowly spreading inside him ,as he gazed discreetly at Jharnaa and listened to her amused voice, as she carried on her playful banter with Shekhar.

Unknown even to himself, Nalin Ghosh was , as the popular phrase went, slowly falling in love with the real girl, sitting opposite to him right now.

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It was two o clock in the morning. The house was completely quiet. However, Jharnaa was very much awake. Her own portrait , returned to her today by Nalin , along with her friend's hand-written note was occupying the place of honour ,on her study table. Jharnaa however, was sitting up on her bed, peering intently at the laptop, as she meticulously looked something up on the internet.

Her childhood diary 'Jharnaa' and all of Rangaa's paintings had been fished out by her ,earlier. Having finished her dinner quickly, she had settled down to, first rereading her childhood diary and then revisiting each of Rangaa's paintings.

Though, Jharnaa still kept a diary , in which she loved to scribble now and then, the meeting in the café ,had rekindled her nostalgia for her first writings. It had been quite some years ,since she had revisited 'Jharnaa', the faithful but observant chronicler of her emotions, all those years back. Reading her own words, written as a nine-year old, had been like meeting an old friend. An old friend, who became all the more dearer, because of what it had let her grow into.

The writing was not perfect ,of course but what it lacked in perfection of syntax and vocabulary, it more than made up, in the freshness of outlook and observation. She had been oddly touched by how much her own younger self had taken in of her surroundings and how neatly she had expressed the same ,in these old pages! As she had read, she had relived it all over again. Her only vacation at Jheelpukur, which had not only shaped but also firmed something inside her. Her love of writing, her appreciation for art, even the warm , uncomplicated affection that she had come to feel for her newfound family ,during that special summer of her childhood.

Always a diligent person, she had, on returning from Jheelpukur, filed them away neatly , in a folder borrowed from her father. However, as very often is the case with old things, the blue folder ,containing all Rangaa's work, had been gathering dust, in a back shelf of her cupboard, these last few years. She had , therefore, been a little apprehensive initially, about the condition, she would find them in. To her relief, the folder, untouched for thirteen long years, had gathered a thick layer of dust for sure but the paintings ,as such ,were in good enough condition. Though the papers had yellowed somewhat, there was no real damage done to them. Neither the sharp lines of the sketches nor the vibrant hues ,that brought them alive, had suffered any irreversible change.

One more thing was coming more and more alive to her and that was the unlikely friendship she had had found in Rangaa, a girl whose real name too she had never bothered to enquire. Her own jottings about the girl, along with the bright, beautiful pictures that she had turned out, all seemed to be adding their own shades to the picture in her mind. It was impossible to think of Rangaa and not to think of the extraordinary perception she had for all that was colourful in this world. As she had gazed at all of Rangaa's work, the germ of an idea had floated into her mind. In her curiosity, she had taken to the internet and some of the stuff that had come up in the course of her browsing, had further convinced her that there might be more to her theory than mere speculation.

She finally shut down her laptop and sat thinking for a couple of minutes. An idea, she had started out with, at the beginning of her net browsing, was taking a firmer shape in her mind. The more she thought about it, the more convinced she became that she was on the right track.

She filed away the paintings once again in the old folder and placing it and the laptop on the study table, decided to finally call it a day. Tomorrow, anyway, Shekhar was coming to see her and Rangaa's other paintings. She could then discuss her idea with him. Shekhar , for all his teasing ways, was the most objective person she knew. What she appreciated more about her cousin was the healthy interest he showed ,in any new idea, especially if it happened to have a scientific approach to it.

As Jharnaa turned off the light and settled down to sleep, she found herself wondering if Nalin would be accompanying her cousin tomorrow. She had felt too shy to enquire the same of Shekhar, when he had called her earlier in the day, to confirm about his visit the next day. After all, Nalin had seemed genuinely interested to see Rangaa's other paintings. She found herself hoping that he would come. A soft smile crept to her lips as she thought of Nalin.

With that smile on her lips and Rangaa's glorious colours ,still swimming in her mind, Jharnaa fell asleep.

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Special vision

“Exceptional talent , no doubt. Though, the lack of training is rather obvious too.”

Shekhar looked up from the painting in his hand to make this comment to his two companions.

To Jharnaa’s secret delight, Nalin had been met by Shekhar, as per prior appointment and brought for the meeting at her home. Jharnaa’s mother, who obviously, could not let any opportunity to indulge her favourite nephew, go waste, had devoted the greater part of her afternoon to prepare some tasty snacks and dessert, which the guests had been lavishly served with. So, it had been quite some time, before they had finally been able to get down to their desired business.

Presently ,all three of them were seated at the big, oakwood dining table, which Jharnaa had carefully cleared out , before laying out Rangaa’s paintings across it. In total, there were nineteen paintings, including Jharnaa’s own portrait. Shekhar and Nalin were seated on the same side, while Jharnaa sat opposite, facing them.

“Oh well, she was hardly ten years old then. That is hardly the time when one is master of one’s game. ” Jharnaa’s loyal heart stood up to her erstwhile friend’s defense.

“Yeah, yeah! I am not denying that my dear sis!” Shekhar raised his palms in a placatory gesture. “ Of course, she was still a child. All I am saying is that there is a naturalness about the work, which usually any kind of formal training does away with. Despite her talent, you can make out the basic flaws that her sketching has.”

Shekhar was quiet for a while, then continued. “Also , now I understand what you meant by her perception of colours. Each one of these pictures, is indeed a riot of colours , isn’t it? She must have had a very vivid imagination indeed. Is not content with a handful of colours , is she?” Shekhar ended his comment with a smile.

“Hmm! I thought you would say that.” Jharnaa quipped. “Actually, I have been thinking about that. And I also have a theory on that.”

“What theory, Jharnaa? This is nothing unique. Little children, especially those who have an artistic bend of mind, often imagine or create such colourful pieces of art.”

Jharnaa did not respond immediately. Instead, she quickly typed something on her laptop and turned the screen towards her visitors. The page open on the screen was a Wikipedia page.

“Tetrachromacy. Do you know what it means?” Her voice had a note of excitement in it.

“Tetrachromacy?” Shekhar slowly repeated the word, as if pondering over it. “It is a term related to optics, isn’t it? Something to do with the perception of vision , mainly colours that we see. I am not sure, of course.”

“Yes, it is. Though trichromacy is more like what you might have heard about. We human beings, you see ,are trichromats. Tetrachromats are a rarity, actually.” Nalin had spoken for the first time, since they had started looking at the pictures. Yet his comment was so apt and accurate to the situation that Jharnaa could not help but be impressed.

“Yes, you are right. Basically it means how many independent cone cells an organism has in its eyes. It decides the range of colours that organism can perceive. We humans are trichromats. We have three cone types in our eyes, while some animals like cats, have only two. Then there are some organisms , who have even four or five cone cells , allowing them to see more colours of the spectrum, than the di and trichromats. The birds, for example , are believed to be pentachromats. Can you even imagine, how colourful this world must look to the birds?”

Jharnaa delivered this little monologue , with a sharp glint of excitement in her beautiful eyes.

None of her companions said anything, so she continued her lecture.

“You see, even I am not an expert on this matter, but I googled about it and came to know these terms, only recently. Basically, not all organisms see things the same way, or at least, they do not perceive the same set of colours. Based on how many cone cells the specie has in its eyes, they see various range of colours. For example, a cat is dichromatic , which means that it has only two cone cells and actually sees a lot less colours than we , who are trichromats. On the other hand, a tetrachromat or a pentachromat, sees a lot more colours than us, because of four and five cone cells in their eyes ,respectively. What is even more interesting is that like many other traits , this too has undergone a lot of evolution. A lot of organisms , who started out being , say ,tetrachromats , went on to become dichromats or trichromats, over the periods of evolution.”

“Very interesting, Jharnaa, but why this sudden lecture on optics?” Shekhar asked the question in a curious, though serious, voice.

“I am coming to it, Shekhar da. If you read this Wikipedia article, you will see that though human beings are accepted trichromats, there have been studies, which have suggested that some of us might actually have tetrachromatic vision, which means there are actually some people, who will see more colours than the average person. In fact, one study mentions this percentage of women , who are likely to have this capability, as 15 % , while another similar study , puts the no. as high as 50%. The numbers vary but both essentially suggest that women are more likely to have this condition than men. In fact, Shekhar da, the second study, which

came up with the 50% value for women, also mentions that as high as 8 % of world's men might also have this unique condition. What I am driving at is this: This condition is rare but not impossible. Also women are more likely to have this condition than men." Jharnaa said confidently.

"So, what are you suggesting, sis? You think, your friend Rangaa..." Shekhar's comment was cut short by Jharnaa's enthusiastic voice.

"Yes, Shekhar da, that is exactly what I am suggesting. Our Rangaa might have been a tetrachromat. It is not just these pictures. You see, I have been thinking about our conversations. Rangaa often pointed out something to me , saying how pretty this and that colour looks , while I couldn't even see anything different than the usual. And I have pretty normal vision. In fact, I too love colours but even I could not keep up or identify with the visions she used to describe to me. It was not just that she was artistic and talented. She just saw more colours, more shades than the average person."

There was such a look of intense conviction on Jharnaa's face that Shekhar was at a loss to say anything for a moment. Maybe to fill the gap, Nalin spoke up. His voice had a thoughtful tone to it when he did.

"Well, it is a known fact that women do have a greater range of colour perception than men. I once read somewhere that it is an evolutionary advantage that women have gained over the years, in comparison to men. They definitely, can see more shades or at least appreciate the minor differences between two, say, very close shades than an average man."

"That even I have heard and most probably does have a scientific basis to it. Supposedly, women developed this better colour perception because they were the gatherers during the hunter-gatherer phase of human evolution. It helped them to gauge the quality of the vegetables and fruits better. Men, on the other hand, were hunters and this kind of skill was not of much use there. In fact, it could be a distraction, putting a hunter to greater danger. For a similar reason, men have better peripheral vision, especially when it comes to motion, while women are supposed to be rather inept in that respect."

"Quite interesting indeed, Nalin. I have no problem in accepting that when it comes to appreciating a greater range of colours, we men ,are indeed a hopeless lot, compared to the worthy fairer sex. Why, my mother and my hopefully-soon-to-be better half are always reminding me of my sheer incompetence in that!" Shekhar's natural teasing way had again reasserted itself, as there was a twinkle in his eye , while imparting the last comment. However, his voice soon became serious as he once again took up the thread of the conversation. "So, while I do not dispute the fact ,that most women might actually be seeing more colours than most men, being this tetrachromat, which you describe , Jharnaa, seems but a little too

farfetched to me. After all , Jharnaa you yourself ,just now mentioned that many of the animals who had been tetrachromat in the distant past, actually, over the period of evolutionary years, converted to tri and even di chromates. Then what basis can we have ,in assuming that a girl , living in the twenty-first century has somehow retained or acquired this odd characteristic? Sorry to damp your enthusiasm , Sis but to me it seems too fantastic to be true.”

Shekhar now turned to the quiet Nalin , as if hoping for some support ,from the other male in the room.

Nalin did not say anything immediately but when he did, his voice was rather measured, as if he was actually thinking while he spoke.

“Honestly, I cannot comment on this as I hardly know anything more on this topic than what I had studied in high school about human eyes. In fact, I remember more from my high school physics, from the chapter of Optics than from biology. However, I am intrigued by Jharnaa’s mention of the studies that have been done in this regard. Surely, the scientists who had embarked on this kind of experimentation, must have some sound basis for the same.” He looked at Jharnaa now. His gaze was direct and there seemed to be a tacit encouragement in them to reveal her further knowledge.

Jharnaa did not hesitate. She felt a warm glow inside, which somehow melted whatever hesitation she might have been feeling some time back ,in speaking freely in front of him Nalin.

“Yes, I was coming to that. About these studies. There has been quite some research on this, it seems. I already told you how one study opined that as many as 50 % of women and 8 % of men are believed to have this fourth cone , that elevates a human from trichromat to tetrachromat. Now, here is the more interesting piece of news. In 2010, a neuroscientist called Gabriel Jordan actually claimed that he had identified a woman who actually was able to identify a lot more colours than any normal trichromat could. Her name is not available of course, as her identity number, like in most scientific experiments, is just a code. But supposedly she qualifies as a functional tetrachromat or a true tetrachromat, if you will! It might appear just a novel idea to you and me, but it is a known and expected phenomenon for optical scientists. There are proper tests for tetrachromacy. Nothing arbitrary about them, I assure you.”

Both Shekhar and Nalin had listened ,without interrupting Jharnaa’s monologue.

At last Nalin spoke. “If this information is indeed true then, I can only say that this will be an amazing gift for an artist.”

“Yes, someone like Rangaa. One who can see this wonderful world of colours and if that person has a way of recreating this, we can only imagine what wonderfully bright and lovely pictures, such an artist would churn out.” Shekhar completed the thought. At this point, his eyes moved over the pictures strewn over the table in a reflective way. As he continued to look, a particular picture caught his eye. It was of a tree, against the backdrop of the sky. Somehow, both the tree and the sky behind had more plethora of colours than one could imagine in such a view. The picture triggered a vague memory in his mind. Without speaking, he opened up his smart phone and tinkered with it for a while. He quickly found what he was looking for. It was a picture, identical to the one he had been looking at, a moment back. A tree, against the backdrop of a sky. Somehow the shape and even the frame, which both pictures occupied, were so similar that the implication was practically impossible to miss. Some instinct told him that the painting on the table and the photograph in his online album were of the same entity. The same tree had been captured in both, once by a ten-year-old painter and again by a fourteen-year-old amateur photographer. The amateur photographer had honed his skills further in the following years and was now competent enough to compare and comment.

He quickly showed the image on his phone screen to Jharnaa and Nalin. It took them a few moments to reach the same conclusion as Shekhar but there was no doubt about the identification. Reading the silent query in their eyes, Shekhar explained. He spoke slowly, as if speaking more to himself than them.

“This is a tree which I had clicked during our Jheelpukur vacation, Jharnaa. It belongs to the same set to which your picture, the one I exhibited in the gallery, belongs. Remember, I told you how your picture was the only one I decided to include in the exhibition. However, I had the hard copies of all the pictures, I took during our vacation in an old album and recently, I converted them all to soft copies. This is the online album, where I have stored them all. This picture of the tree, you remember, I took, when one day, you and I, went out for a walk with grandfather. I bet it is the same tree, which your friend also spotted and captured in her painting.”

“Yes, it is the same Shekhar da. I remember, the walk. Actually it was close to the hilly mound, where we had our picnic, so it was actually in the vicinity of my and Rangaa’s regular meeting spot also. Quite a coincidence, isn’t it? Both you and Rangaa liked this particular tree enough to wish to capture it.” Jharnaa said with a smile, her eyes still darting between the two renderings of the same tree.

“Yet, how different they are, Jharnaa. The photograph seems practically colourless, while the one painted by Rangaa seems to be bursting with life and colour!” Shekhar’s voice had become dreamy, as he expressed this comment.

“You are right , Shekhar da. It is all about perception. Rangaa saw more and tried to recreate that. Even if we can’t see what she saw, her attempts to capture that, end up revealing more to us than we would normally see. We can’t have her eyes, but she still manages to offer us a glimpse of her magnificent vision.”

Shekhar smiled at his sister and looked towards Nalin, as if requesting his comment.

Nalin gave a soft laugh. “So, she has convinced you , my friend. What her profoundly informed lecture could not achieve, a lone tree managed to do.”

“As Shekhar da said, coincidence! They both picked on the same tree to capture in their own way.” Jharnaa’s voice had a sweet, delighted note to it.

Nalin’s voice, however, was rather solemn when he responded. “Not a coincidence! There are no coincidences in nature. Everything happens for a purpose. At least, I believe so.”

This comment was received with silence. Jharnaa who had sounded so animated a few minutes back, suddenly seemed shy. She lowered her head and perhaps realizing that this sudden quietude on her part, might be interpreted otherwise, attempted to diffuse the situation by an offer of coffee.

The offer was heartily taken up. After all, as Shekhar observed, intellectual discussions always demanded a healthy consumption of the hot beverages, be it tea or coffee. Between these two stalwarts of mind clearers, coffee had the distinction of being considered the more sophisticated. Haven’t the coffee houses always served as the melting pots of great minds ,which had yielded the brightest of ideas, he intoned ,In his mockingly serious tone.

Shekhar’s soliloquy on the merits of coffee, had been offered in jest, as such , but Jharnaa was still grateful to her cousin, for diffusing a situation ,that had threatened to become embarrassing for her and Nalin.

Even as Jharnaa busied herself in the kitchen, preparing the coffee, she could feel Nalin’s comment in her mind. The conviction in his strong voice, as he had declared that, nothing in nature, was coincidence and that everything had an ultimate purpose. Had he been talking just about the tree ,that had been captured by both artists or had he been hinting at something else altogether? The answer that her heart seemed to be suggesting, nevertheless, brought a shy smile to her pretty face. Unknown to herself, she was blushing. A lovely shade of brownish pink , as Rangaa would have said!

Shekhar and Nalin stayed a little while longer , enjoying Jharnaa's coffee and chatting about other topics. It was pleasantly surprising to Jharnaa as how quickly ,an easy camaraderie had sprung up between them. They were chatting and bantering effortlessly, like old friends.

So, it was with ,quite a sigh of regret ,that Shekhar finally got up, pleading another important engagement. The bonafide sister that Jharnaa was, she obviously ,could not let the opportunity go by, without teasing her brother ,as what this other vital engagement was.

"Going to meet Ratna di? Has she forgiven you already for being late to her birthday party, Shekhar da?", quipped Jharnaa mischievously.

This Ratna di was no lesser than ,the soon-to be Shekhar's better half, so naturally, Jharnaa could be quite ruthless, when it came to teasing her cousin about her. Shekhar made a mock gesture of hitting the teasing girl but he was chuckling in his usual manner, all the same.

At the door, he turned round and said casually. "By the way, Jharnaa, why did you stop drawing and painting? I remember, you showed a lot of interest that summer ,in both sketching and painting. In fact, I might still have some of your older work, in my folders.Now, that you have shared your little secret with us, I understand it even more. But you practically gave it up, after that vacation?" Shekhar asked her with a questioning shrug.

"Did she now?" Nalin looked at Jharnaa with a questioning glance.

"Yes, in fact, I was just thinking, if you had the slightest inclination, maybe you could try to make a sort of sketch of your friend. In this digital age, you never know, what we may unearth, if we had a sort of likeness to go by!"

Shekhar seemed to think it was quite an idea. He was not one to let go easily, of something that had had piqued his interest. Nalin could tell that Shekhar meant to have a go at locating this mysterious girl , whose talent they had all been discussing.

"No, I cannot do that". Jharnaa's reply was so swift that it almost sounded like snapping. It surprised Shekhar and even the calm face of Nalin furrowed at her abruptness.

Maybe Jharnaa realized immediately ,by the change in their expressions, as how rude she might have sounded, so she hastened to make amends.

"I am sorry, but I am hardly qualified to do something like that. Drawing a portrait from memory, requires a lot of talent and I am nowhere half as good. In fact, I am surprised , Shekhar da that you should even suggest that. Do I ever draw or paint, really? " Her voice sounded a bit shaky as she tried to explain.

Shekhar shrugged and said in a resigned voice that it was indeed true. “Yes, you have been somehow very adamant on that one point. Even grandfather couldn’t make you budge from your refusal.”

Nalin, who was following this conversation said nothing. They lingered for a few more moments as both men put on their shoes quickly and then left. Jharnaa did not see them out. Instead she slowly walked back to the table, still strewn with Rangaa’s paintings. There was no one to see her at this moment. If there had been someone watching, he would have said that the young girl looked thoughtful, almost as if something had been stirred deep inside her.

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Jharnaa was looking intently at her phone screen. She had already read the article twice. It was a news article about an artist who was reportedly a true tetrachromat, including an interview also by her. Some of the artist’s comments about her condition, were so uncannily similar to, what Jharnaa had experienced with Rangaa, that Jharnaa had almost expected her to be Rangaa herself. As a follow up, she had looked up the artist further on internet and obviously that had put to rest any hopes, she might have harboured, about it being her long-lost friend. To begin with, the lady was not only way older than what Rangaa was expected now to be. Also, there was no doubt about the fact that she was not of Indian extraction. So, Rangaa she was not, but Jharnaa had no doubt in her mind, that this artist and her now-lost friend, were fellow tetrachromats. At least, it could be safely assumed that they were blessed with a vision that was beyond ordinary. There was the same vividness and wide range of colours, which had always emanated from Rangaa’s pictures. The article had further elaborated that such people also were found to have enhanced night vision, so that some of the artist’s pictures of night time, also showed an exceptional vitality of perception. ‘Super vision’ was what the article writer had called this capability and Jharnaa agreed with the description. Compared to other mortals, this vision was definitely ‘super vision’. It was extraordinary and refreshing to a whole new degree.

Jharnaa could only sigh and feel sad that her friend’s talent was not getting the same kind of approbation which it deserved. She wrote a thank you message to Nalin for sending her the article link and added a smiley.

Her own face lit up with a smile when Nalin’s reply came back promptly. It said that he and Shekhar owed it to her. If she had not done the groundwork, about reading up on the tetrachromacy and all, they would never have taken an interest. Once you start digging and

googling, it is always a wonder as how much you find on any topic , in this age of information technology!

That is what Nalin had done. Once the seed had been planted in his mind, he had gone online and it had been just a matter of clicks to hit this story of the woman , who supposedly was blessed with 'super vision'.

Nalin went on to say that Shekhar too had been impressed with the article. There was quite a three-way communication going on about Rangaa and the phenomenon that they now associated with her.

Shekhar, in his usual teasing way ,had wondered aloud, if Rangaa, wherever she was, was getting a nasty attack of hiccups. If people think of you or talk about you, then the person in question gets hiccups. That is what Jharnaa's mother said all the time. Though the recommended solution for overcoming those hiccups, offered by that same mother , was drinking a full glass of water, Jharnaa had always liked the quaint explanation, in the first place. Still Shekhar's comment had touched a chord in Jharnaa's heart and mind.

Going by the theory of hiccups, Jharnaa thought, Nalin too should be suffering from a fit of hiccups quite often. Wasn't she thinking of him more than usual, nowadays?

Nalin had mentioned that he had shared the same article with Shekhar too but Jharnaa knew that neither she nor Nalin, were completely open with her cousin about the other big thing that was going on in their lives.

The well-meaning cousin ,who had inadvertently brought them together, was ,for example, not invited to the movie show that she and Nalin planned to catch the next afternoon. It was a delicious little secret that Jharnaa was still keeping close to her chest.

Rangaa ,the girl with super vision, would have had some quaint descriptions about the pretty colours that suffused Jharnaa's cheeks and eyes ,as she considered this harmless deception ,being meted out to her dear cousin.

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Jharnaa fervently hoped that her companions realized now, as how hopeless their quest was.

There was no hope of locating Rangaa, not even of deciphering whether she was alive or dead or if she had ever painted another picture in her life ,after Jharnaa lost touch with her. Shekhar

had finally agreed , in a resigned tone. Even the exhibition of her pictures, at the same gallery , where Shekhar had displayed his photographs, not so long back, had elicited nothing about their creator. The viewers had admired and expressed curiosity about the exceptional renderings of the unknown artist, but no clue had come forth ,about the girl, who might have produced them, in the first place.

However, her pictures were still there, Jharnaa had argued with her cousin. Those pictures, drawn by a girl with unique eyes. Could they not be sent out in the world, to speak for their creator? This is the question that Jharnaa asked herself and the others.

This was the time of social media, when anything and everything seemed to be out in the digital world for people to gape at, comment, like and whatnot. Then, why not Rangaa's pictures! And why, Jharnaa had wondered aloud to Shekhar and Nalin, could not, just that be enough!

"I don't know why Shekhar *da* is, so hell bent on discovering the girl", mused Jharnaa ,with something like vexation in her voice. Nalin and Jharnaa were having coffee ,at the coffee shop outside Jharnaa's college. Nalin had dropped by, straight from his office to meet Jharnaa. Such impromptu meetings were all the sweeter for their unexpectedness and usually delighted Jharnaa. Today, however, there was a note of irritation in her voice, as she complained about her beloved cousin's singlemindedness.

Nalin took his time to sip his coffee thoughtfully before answering. "Shekhar is an artist himself. Maybe that is why , he feels so strongly. He really wants this girl located and if possible, given her due. He is also curious , I think, to know how her talent blossomed out over the years. That is , if she really continued painting. I think it is a natural reaction but , yes, he does not seem to be able to let it go."

"Natural, Yes, but surely he realizes how impossible a task that is! There is really nothing to go on." Jharnaa seemed to be literally pleading with Nalin to agree with her.

Nalin, never one to be hurried, looked at her over the rim of his coffee mug. To his gaze, Jharnaa seemed a trifle more irritated with Shekhar's attempts ,to locate Rangaa, than was called for. In stark contrast to Jharnaa's initial enthusiasm , she seemed to get unnecessarily agitated whenever the topic of finding Rangaa now surfaced. Almost as if she was only content with everyone knowing how talented her friend had been but there it should all end, her attitude seemed to say.

Nalin decided to try another tack.

"Have you ever thought about sketching Rangaa. Just as you remember her." Nalin asked.

I, draw, Rangaa? You must be crazy. I can hardly draw any stick figures at all. Attempting a portrait , that too , from sheer memory, is simply out of question. Has Shekhar *da* been hammering you with that idea?" Jharnaa's voice seemed almost shocked with incredulity.

"No,no", Nalin hastened to defend himself from Jharnaa's flashing eyes. "No one gave me that idea. I just thought. You and Shekhar both seem to have an artistic way of approaching things,

so wondered if it is at all worth trying. Also ,Shekhar quite praised the sketches you did that summer, so I thought.”

“Praised my sketches? Really, Shekhar *da*? When did he see them, in the first place? I never draw or paint at all!”

“Oh come on, Jharnaa. That day when you two were reminiscing about that golden vacation in Jheelpukur, didn’t he mention as how you spent that summer, either writing in your diary or sketching something? So, I thought...” Nalin’s voice was casual.

To his surprise, Jharnaa looked oddly uncomfortable as if she did not like the direction this conversation was taking. She picked up her coffee cup and took , what seemed to Nalin, way too long a sip from it. Almost as if she was stalling for time.

Finally, when she did keep down her cup, she still seemed distracted, as if her thoughts were far away.

Finally, she spoke. “Well, if he did give you that impression, it is wrong, Nalin. I never ever draw, not even stick figures, as I said. Of the two hobbies, I dabbled in, that summer, writing has stayed with me. I still scribble now and then but a drawing pencil or a paint brush, I never pick up. I don’t know where you got that idea from.”

Jharnaa’s voice ,though soft, had a touch of defiance about it. Nalin was rather surprised. Not only because she sounded so unlike herself but also because he had indeed seen some sketches by Jharnaa ,that Shekhar had one day shown him. While planning for the exhibition, where Rangaa’s work had been shown to public, Nalin had offered to help out Shekhar with some of the arrangements. At that time, they had got talking and Shekhar, while showing his earlier work to his new friend, had unearthed some old paintings by Jharnaa also. Most of them, he had said, Jharnaa had done during that summer only. Though nothing exceptional, they had had a fresh quality to them, so he was indeed surprised to hear Jharnaa denying it so vehemently now.

Even if you do not grow up to be an artist, every child draws and paints a bit in her growing up years. Also, most cultured Indian parents do encourage their child to take some artistic lessons during their school days. So, it was quite a logical conclusion to assume that Jharnaa too would have done the same. After all, he had seen her earlier work, hadn’t he?

He opened his mouth to say the same but then decided otherwise. Some vague instinct forbade him from doing so. Instead ,he surreptitiously watched her, while pretending to concentrate on his coffee. Now that he thought about it, he also remembered Shekhar’s comment as how Jharnaa had completely given it up after that golden Jheelpukur summer.

Jharnaa, on the other hand seemed to be lost in her thoughts. Her complexion, specially the cheeks, were getting to be of a colour, that Rangaa would have described in a different way than Nalin could. For the time being, Nalin decided to rest his case.

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“I am Rangaa”

“Hi Jharnaa. Don’t you recognize me ?” ,the girl standing in front of her asked as she smiled at Jharnaa. Jharnaa did not want to sound rude but she was really at a loss to place the face in front of her. The girl did look a little familiar, specially the eyes , which had a laughing quality about them. She smiled back, while shaking her head slowly to indicate her lack of recognition though.

The girl laughed. “I guess it has been a long time, we have met before. I am” Before she could reveal her name, they were distracted by a sound that caused her to turn back at the person who had called out her.

“Rangaa di!. Here you are. I thought I would never find you.” Milan, Shekhar’s younger cousin was panting as he came running with some parcels in his hand. The girl turned round to speak to the younger boy, and they moved off to speak together.

Jharnaa remained frozen, as if she had been turned to stone. Rangaa! The name continued to vibrate in her head as she looked on. Shekhar was nowhere to be seen. Had Shekhar struck gold in his quest for the elusive Rangaa after all? But how was it possible, it couldn’t be, Jharnaa kept saying in her mind. It was simply not possible. She was jolted out of her reverie by a gentle nudge on her shoulder. She started at the touch. Turning, she found herself looking into the deep brown eyes of Nalin, who had just arrived.

“What happened ? You look like you have seen a ghost.” Nalin was saying ,as he continued to observe her.

A couple of seconds passed before she replied and that was more like a question than a response to Nalin’s query.

“Do you know anything about that girl? Did Shekhar da finally manage to find her or something?” Jharnaa was actually careless enough to point a finger at the girl she had just been speaking to. Nalin gently nudged her hand down before fully looking at the girl Jharnaa was pointing towards.

After giving her a careful look, he shook his head and looked back at her. “No, I don’t but then I am not expected to know anyone here , right? That is except you and Shekhar of course. I did spot your mother though but as she looked busy, so I did not bother her. In fact, I haven’t seen the happy bridegroom yet. But I guess, that is to be expected. It being his big day and all.” Nalin was making conversation ,as he looked around at the bustle in the reception hall, they were standing in.

The gathering was huge and typical to an Indian wedding. It was Shekhar's wedding reception and Nalin too had been invited. Dressed beautifully in a violet coloured saree, her lush black hair done up in an elaborate coiffure, Jharnaa was indeed a pretty sight to behold. Even as he looked admiringly at her, he could not fail to spot that Jharnaa looked stricken. Almost as if she was going to burst into tears any moment.

Nalin softly reached out to hold her hand , before speaking again. "What is the matter , Jharnaa? You look like you are going to cry. Surely, the bride can't be that bad to make you want to weep!" His last words he spoke softly, as he tried to inject some humour into this conversation.

As he had hoped, that finally got through to Jharnaa. She laughed nervously and finally looked fully at him. "No, no. it is nothing like that. It is just that, that girl over there said....." Jharnaa stumbled over her words, as she tried to regain her composure. She did not finish the sentence and Nalin did not press. Instead , he looked around again and spotting one of the many food stalls, started walking towards one, pulling Jharnaa gently along with him.

"Never mind, I am parched. That stall seems to have some *aam panna*. Lets get a glass each, Jharnaa."

Reaching the mentioned stall, Nalin left her to go get two glasses of the refreshing drink. Jharnaa in the meantime, sat down at one of the many small tables that had been strewn around the enormous reception hall, for the guests. The dinner buffet was yet to be laid out but snacks and light refreshments were already being enjoyed by the guests, milling about the place. You could walk over to the numerous stalls dishing out the same or sit patiently at one of the tables, while the serving waiters came over to offer you something.

Nalin was back with their two glasses of the mango drink, so much favoured in these hot months. He placed Jharnaa's glass in front of her and settled in his own chair as he looked around appreciatively.

"Nice party!" he commented as he sipped his drink. A waiter placed two small plates of chicken snacks in front of them and left. They ate and sipped their drinks in silence for a few moments.

Then Nalin casually remarked. " What were you asking Jharnaa? About Shekhar finding her? Surely, Shekhar is not being foolish enough to go chasing after other girls, when he has landed such a lovely bride!" Nalin was smiling as he watched the bride seated on her ornamented throne, talking, and receiving gifts from the umpteen guests coming over. Nalin himself had done the same a few moments back ,before he had spotted Jharnaa.

Jharnaa laughed again and Nalin was glad to note that her laugh sounded merrier now than before. “No way, Ratna di will kill him if he does anything like that. Not that he would, anyway. They are a devoted couple, Shekhar da and Ratna di! I guess, I should start calling her *boudi* now, but she has always been like a friend. A merry creature she is, just like Shekhar da!” Her voice had an affectionate note in it as she rambled on about her cousin and new sister in law.

Nalin was quite sure that there had been something else on her mind, a few minutes back but since she looked relaxed, he decided not to pursue it right then. Fate however, had no intention of keeping Nalin in suspense. Even as he watched, a rather large girl walked over to sit at their table. It was obvious, she had come over to speak to Jharnaa.

“So sorry, Jharnaa. I had to rush over like that. I guess, that is how it is at these events. So many things to take care of. But I love to reconnect with people also ,so there was no way, I was going to miss it.” The girl was obviously a good natured talkative person. She laughed again as she commented, “It is obvious you still do not recognize me. I guess, it has been some time, so I really do not blame you, dear. Well, I am Mallika, one of Shekhar’s umpteen cousins on his mother’s side.”

Jharnaa’s voice was a scarcely a whisper , as she blurted out. “Mallika *di*! Now , I remember but... but he called you Rangaa di!”

Mallika laughed merrily again. “Yes, that is what all the younger cousins call me. We are a big family of cousins and after you have exhausted the usual litany of *bordi*, *mejdi*, *sejdi* , people tend to get creative. So, there is a “*Phool di*” and I am the “Rangaa di” before they can commence the “*Chhod di*” again. Of course, it can be made simpler of course ,if we just drop these rank-specific connotations and simply adopt the practice of addressing by name, like the westerners.”

“This is a quaint custom , though.” Nalin interjected at this point. He had been following the conversation and thought he was beginning to grasp the cause of Jharnaa’s discomfiture that he had noticed sometime before. Jharnaa, Nalin noted, was now looking relieved. Her face was calm and she was even smiling gently at Mallika.

Mallika, on hearing Nalin’s voice, turned her attention to him and readily agreed. “Of course, of course, why should we always follow the western way in everything? It is indeed a quaint custom and a kind of custom that only big families like us ever need to come up with. Western families, what with their sparse families, don’t really have the need for this particular brand of creativity. An “Uncle” or an “Aunt” or for that matter a blanket “cousin” suffices for all their relationships. And they do not bother about the *dada didi* part also. A few years here and there is of no importance.”

Nalin acknowledged this comment with a smile and in a gesture of friendliness introduced himself. "Hi, I am Nalin, Shekhar's friend", he said. Some vague instinct told him that Jharnaa needed a few more moments to recover and hoped to grant her the same by intervening in Mallika's monologue, lest she spot Jharnaa's odd reaction.

Mallika however, was engrossed in her own talk. She flashed a bright smile at Nalin as she replied immediately. "Well, I do know a good many of Shekhar's friends and I am rather good at remembering faces, but I don't think we have met before. Have we, Nalin?"

"Oh no, you haven't , Mallika *ji*. Shekhar and I have not known each other that long." Nalin clarified.

"Oh ok. Never mind, it was nice meeting you, Nalin." Mallika quipped, as she stood up, from her chair, as if about to leave.

It was clear to Nalin that the friendly good-natured girl that Mallika was, she obviously had a lot more catching up to do with lots of other acquaintances and was, for the time being at least, done with Jharnaa.

"By the way, Jharnaa, I love your *saree*. You are looking very pretty tonight ", commented Mallika, as she started to move away.

"Thanks, Mallika *di!*", Jharnaa replied smiling, "so do you!"

Mallika too was decked up , as is expected at a grand family function but no one would ever describe her as a beauty. She was too gawky in her gestures and rather plain to look at. However, what she missed in looks, she made up in her friendliness, as at this comment, she dropped a good -natured thanks and finally moved away.

It somehow seemed a little quiet after the ebullience of Mallika's personality but Jharnaa was relaxed again now.

Nalin, however, was thoughtful again. His keen intelligence had put two and two together even while Mallika had been holding court. He was now sure that it had been the mention of "Rangaa" that had brought on Jharnaa's discomfiture. Obviously, it had been "Rangaa", about whose search Jharnaa had wondered about, when Nalin had walked up to her.

The clarification that Mallika was not actually *the Rangaa* seemed to have put her at ease again.

Why, Nalin did wonder, was it so discomfiting to Jharnaa, that her lost friend might be discovered?

The irony was not lost to him that both Jharnaa's long lost friend and Shekhar's friendly cousin had been given the name "Rangaa" and were addressed so , although they both had other legitimate names. There seemed to be something about the name Rangaa. As if it was indeed like a real colour, that got applied to a person!

More intriguing to Nalin was the uneasiness it brought about in Jharnaa every time she entertained the possibility of "Rangaa" being found. Now, Nalin wondered again, why should that disturb her so?

The mystery of lost Rangaa was getting deeper.

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Jharnaa looked around with a puzzled face. The park, usually, had more visitors in the evenings. At this time of late afternoon though, it kind of looked a little deserted. She and Nalin did meet here sometimes, specially if Jharnaa's classes got over early. This park happened to be situated roughly midway, between her college and Nalin's workplace. Still, Nalin's sudden phone call and impromptu plan to meet here today had come as a surprise. Only last week, at Shekhar's wedding reception, Nalin had mentioned that he was expecting a more than usual ,hectic time at work, the coming month. Having paid the autorickshaw, she started walking slowly, while continuing to look out for Nalin. He was nowhere to be seen. Usually, Nalin would be the one waiting. Maybe, something had come up at his office, after he made his call and he had got held up, Jharnaa mused to herself. She thought, she would wait for a few more minutes and then give him a call.

Also, she could not help but wonder that Nalin had somehow sounded mysterious, as if he had had something up his sleeve. Jharnaa smiled to herself as she pondered on this last point. If Nalin was up to some mischief really, it would indeed amuse Jharnaa. Nalin was a very intelligent and interesting person to talk to and deeply warm and sensitive in his bearing to others but there was nothing gregarious or prank-loving about him. Now, if it had been Shekhar *da*, Jharnaa might have been ready for almost anything. Engrossed in these thoughts, she continued walking ,albeit slowly ,towards a shaded area, when she felt, rather than saw, a presence near her.

Almost instinctively, she turned round, half expecting to see Nalin. Instead, her gaze met a girl, around her own age, looking attentively at her, with a soft smile on her face. For a minute, Jharnaa did not know what to say. The girl was still watching her, as if she knew something that Jharnaa didn't.

At least Jharnaa spoke up. "Er....Did you want to say something to me? I am sorry but I do not seem to have ever met you before?", she muttered uncertainly.

"Oh! But you know me, Jheeli! It's me, Rangaa!"

Involuntarily, Jharnaa took a step backward.

"No! It can't be." Jharnaa wanted to shout, but her voice was a mere whisper.

She continued to back away and would have stumbled and fallen, had she not collided with Nalin ,who seemed to have suddenly appeared behind her.

She had never been more relieved to see anyone in her life before. She clung to him as if she was in mortal fear of something and only Nalin could save her from her plight. Her face was white and her hands , even as they clutched Nalin desperately, were trembling.

"Tell her to go away, Nalin. Please tell her to go away. She is lying. She is not Rangaa. She could not be Rangaa. It is impossible. Make her go away, Nalin. Do something.", Jharnaa was half shouting , half sobbing as she buried her face into his shirt. Nalin put a soothing arm around her to draw her in his embrace and let her continue like that, until she raised her eyes again. This time, when she looked around to take another look at the girl, she saw that she had moved away. She was now standing at some distance and instead of the half-smile that had been on her face a few minutes before, there was a look of mild concern. However, to Jharnaa's immense relief, she no longer tried to come near her or make any further conversation with her.

"Come , Jharnaa, let us sit down. You seem to be not well." Nalin's voice was soothing, yet firm, as he gently led her to one of the nearby park benches and made her sit down.

It was around 4 o'clock in the afternoon and this being a weekday, there was no one around. Nalin and Jharnaa had the place to themselves. Full five minutes elapsed before Jharnaa finally stopped crying and looked up. Nalin was still holding one of her hands firmly when she finally wiped her eyes and looked at him. There was still misery on her lovely face, but he could spot something else also. A resolution, as if she had finally decided on some course of action.

"Talk to me, Jharnaa. You said she could not be Rangaa. Why is that? For all you know, she might be Rangaa." Nalin was saying.

“No, she could not be. Because Rangaa is dead”, came Jharnaa’s reply.

Nalin’s face showed no surprise, as he absorbed these words. He just looked steadily at Jharnaa as if urging her to explain herself.

At last, Jharnaa started speaking.

Her first words were spoken haltingly, as if explaining to someone with dubious intelligence.

“Rangaa is dead. She died that same summer in Jheelpukur.”

“How can you be sure? You told us that she never turned up after your last meeting, so you simply left the painting materials near that stream and came away.” Nalin’s voice was flat. If he was intrigued by her words, he was not showing any signs of the same.

“Yes I did. I did not tell a lie. I just did not tell you guys everything.” Her voice was quiet but there was hesitation in it anymore.

She slowly entangled her hand from Nalin’s firm grip and faced away from him. For a few seconds, there was silence and then she started speaking, in soft, dreamy sort of voice.

“I told you that I never met her again. That is not true. In fact, I met someone else who came to meet me at the same spot, when I went there the last day. A little, dumb boy, who had known Rangaa and had come to fetch me. A mere child, who was constantly trying to make me understand something, by his gestures. But he was mute and I was not being able to make out his sense. He kept putting his hands in a folded gesture against one of his ears and making some inarticulate sounds. I thought he was saying that Rangaa was asleep, but he nodded in head in denial when I asked him if that was the case. At last, he took my hand, as if asking me to come with him. I followed him and he took me to a house , which had a lot of people crowded around it.”

Jharnaa stopped for a moment at this point and taking a deep breath, resumed her tale.

“The moment I saw that house and all those people gathered there, I knew. No one, so much as ,spelled it out for me but I just knew. Nor did I even go inside the house and confirm but it was there in the atmosphere of that house. The stench of recent death. I just knew that my friend was dead. She was never coming back. She would never look at the world with her unique eyes or paint a single picture again in her life. Her life had been cut short by some sudden illness or accident, I never precisely found out which but then I did not really care. What mattered was that she was gone. Like my parents, Rangaa too had been snatched from me.”

Nalin knew she meant her biological parents , who also had died, only sometime before these events in Jheelpukur. He could only imagine how devastating this might have been ,to the nine-

year old girl who was still recovering from the loss of her parents and was just beginning to find a new family and herself again. A fresh loss, this time, of a friend , who had seemed more like a soul mate than just a friend! He would have liked to reach out and hold Jharnaa's hand again. To offer some warmth, some comfort. However, an air of detachment seemed to have grown around Jharnaa. So, Nalin refrained, deciding to let her continue her tale as she saw fit.

In a dreamy voice Jharnaa told her tale.

"I ran from the place. I just ran blindly but instead of going home, I went back to that glade, beside the stream."

At this point, Jharnaa stopped abruptly, as if she was not sure if she should go on.

She did resume though and when she did, her voice was somehow flatter than it had been so far. Nalin could not be sure but he felt a certain wall going up. Her voice, despite its softness had been passionate so far but now seemed to have receded to a lifeless pitch.

"The picture, which the little mute boy had brought with him ,nestled within a drawing book, was lying on a rock nearby. Maybe, he had been instructed by Rangaa that he would find me there and that he should hand it over to me, along with the sad tidings."

Jharnaa stopped again and was quiet for so long that Nalin thought she was done. But then she spoke again. Her voice was even softer now, as she uttered her next words.

"I knew it was Rangaa's gift for me. Her last and final gift but somehow I could not take it. I cannot tell you anything more. Just that I could not accept the gift that Rangaa had left behind for me. I don't know what I thought. Maybe, that if I took this, it would mean that Rangaa truly was gone. On the other hand....."

"On the other hand, if you just went back to pretending that Rangaa had simply not turned up, she was , in some way, still alive." Nalin finished her thought.

Jharnaa did not say anything. She was staring ahead but Nalin was sure ,not really seeing anything. Maybe she was seeing another scene or maybe a series of scenes that had played out in Jheelpukur, all those years back.

Nalin took a deep breath. He felt Jharnaa was done for now. So, he was no longer afraid of interrupting her story or hurting her feelings.

In his strong , steady voice, he summed up the situation.

"It is not as strange as you think, Jharnaa. It happens all the time. Our mind has its own ways of protecting us. You had gone through a huge loss. You were just about getting over it. Finding

new hobbies, coming to forge bonds with your new foster family. Rangaa's friendship , along with opening your eyes to the beauty of the world, was also playing a very important role in this healing process. Then her sudden death! It threatened to destroy everything. It threatened to push you back. Back to that abyss of pain and despair, which you were just beginning to climb out of."

Nalin paused here for a moment but not for long.

"So, your unconscious mind made the decision for you. It simply blocked out the last memories in this context. The memory of meeting the little mute boy and following him to Rangaa's house, where you learnt of her death. By leaving the painting there and returning home empty-handed, you convinced yourself that this last part actually never happened."

"The very next day, we left Jheelpukur and never went back again. It was over and done with." Jharnaa's voice had a note of finality in it.

The silence between them was thick, yet strangely peaceful. As if something hard and hurting had finally been replaced with a softer and gentler version of it. However, Nalin was not satisfied. There seemed to be something unfinished about this tale, as if a vital piece was still missing.

He was just thinking how to say this without hurting Jharnaa when she looked at him, a sad smile on her voice. In a voice, that she tried but failed to make chirpy, she quipped. "You must think me so silly. Pretending not to accept and all. A real mental case if ever there was one!"

"No, absolutely not!" Nalin's voice was almost savage in its repressed ferocity.

As Jharnaa looked askance at her companion, Nalin looked intensely at her and grabbed both her hands in a firm grip as he delivered his verdict. "No, Jharnaa, you were not weak. In fact, you were strong, you were determined. Determined to fight back, determined not to be hurtled back into the despair that threatened to overwhelm you. So, you took the only possible course of action that your subconscious mind suggested then. You shut out the knowledge of Rangaa's death. You loved your friend, but it was an act of survival to shut out the painful knowledge and return to life."

"And that is how it has remained all these years, until.... ", Jharnaa's voice trailed off.

"Until all this came out. First Shekhar's exhibition, my returning the portrait, then unearthing of all Rangaa's paintings and finally Shekhar's constant talk of trying to find Rangaa!"

“Yes, if only Shekhar *da* had not gone on and on about trying to locate Rangaa, I could have just gone on as I always did. I would remember Rangaa, her talent, her unique ways of seeing colours and ...” , at this point Jharnaa gulped, “....wondering about her disappearance!”

Now that she had finally confessed this strange truth, Jharnaa let out a sigh. She was very still, as she seemed to study her own hands, which were no longer shaking.

Nalin however, had something more to say. After a brief glance of hesitation, he ploughed ahead.

“There was another sacrifice that you made in your attempt to block out the painful memory. Wasn’t there, Jharnaa?”

Jharnaa looked fully into Nalin’s face. She did not answer his question but from her look, he could fathom that she had already guessed what he was getting at.

“You gave up painting. As if your subconscious mind strictly told you that your rendezvous with colours was all part of the episode with Rangaa and if she was gone, so should your hobby too. Maybe you were afraid that the pain would overwhelm you if entered that world again.”

“You seem to know my mind better than me.”, Jharnaa murmured with a soft laugh.

“Sometimes, it is easier to read other’s minds than our own. But, Jharnaa, I am serious. That is what really struck me odd. Your vehemence about never painting, when It was obvious that you had done it in the past. Also, Shekhar mentioned as how you just gave it up after that vacation. In fact, he went so far as to mention that this was a topic on which you remained adamant throughout your adolescence, while in most other things, you were compliant enough.”

“Yes, it did puzzle my family a lot. I even took martial art lessons, because my parents insisted, when I had no interest in it at all. But a sketch pen or a paint brush , I never picked up again. I barely managed to get through the art classes that our all-round education system so stresses upon. The hardest part was saying no to grandfather. He was an affectionate soul who genuinely wanted to encourage my art, being of an artistic temperament himself and I had to keep saying no to him. However, it was lucky for me that he was not a pushy person, though I hated to see him disappointed.” Jharnaa’s voice was touched by mild regret as she thought of her now deceased grandfather. She had been more than usually close to that kindly soul ,who had gifted her that name sake diary and the painting materials , all those years back.

“You should take up painting again, Jharnaa.” Nalin’s voice had an urgency about it, as if it was more a matter of vital importance for him that Jharnaa should pick up a paint brush again.

Jharnaa did not protest, nor did she give any sign that she was even considering his suggestion.

A gust of cold wind blew across them ,making Jharnaa shiver.

“It is getting dark. I should go home.” Jharnaa stood up with a hurried gesture as if she meant to leave right away. There was still a good deal of light left but Nalin sensed that she had decided to leave. He had been about to say something more but could see that it would have to wait, as Jharnaa had already begun to move away. Taken aback by her abrupt departure, he too got up and followed Jharnaa out of the park.

Nalin too had a confession to make. It was nothing as momentous as what Jharnaa had just now shared but his honest heart would not let the deception go unconfessed for long.

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Dear Jharnaa

[Excerpt from Jharna's diary]

Dear Jharnaa,

I don't know how to start today. Today was an extraordinary day for me. So, extraordinary that even now I feel strangely shaken, though it has also brought a measure of peace with it. Is it possible to experience both intense restlessness and remarkable quietude in the same breath? Yet, that is exactly what I felt today.

Ever since the day, I and you became friends, you have shared my life in a way that even my closest of family members might not realize. Yet, going through my past entries, especially the ones dating from and soon after the Jheelpukur vacation, I find that I kept even you in dark about the events of the last day there.

I would have profusely apologized if our bond had been a little less close. So, instead of wasting time in abject apologies, I will just amend my mistake by bringing you up to date. That is what friends do!

All these years, I pretended that Rangaa and her present whereabouts are a mystery to me and that is because on the last day of my vacation, my friend failed to turn up at our usual meeting spot. I have always maintained that my last act there, had been to deposit all my painting materials, as a parting gift to Rangaa and then I had returned. It is the truth but not the whole truth. Now for the truth:

Our own meeting spot, whose presence was as secret and snug, as the little stream flowing through it was, ensconced there. It still amazes me as how, despite the onslaught of picnickers, always venturing so close by, this little glade was able to keep its serene dignity. You might chide me by pointing out that I have no way of vouching for the accuracy of my last statement. But, trust me, when I say it indeed was so. There was a virginal, untouched air about the place, as if nobody, except I and Rangaa, ever breathed the air of that place. A little oasis nestled in the pretty hills of Jheelpukur!

I know, I know, it could not have been that secret! After all, now I know that Nalin too had discovered this haven and somehow, I do not grudge him the serenity he must have gathered over there. All I am trying to say, Jharnaa, is that it felt like that. Clean, pure, unblemished!

However, it is the other visitor, the little, mute boy who came looking for me there, whose presence I denied all these years. Of course, I had nothing against the poor child. He was in fact, the carrier of a precious gift for me, from my friend. However, it was the news he brought, that

I have denied hearing all these years. *He had come to tell me that Rangaa is dead but also that before she died, she left me a painting. A portrait of my nine-year old self, that she had done with her own hands, before she left this world.*

Since he was a child and he could not speak like us, he had to drag me to Rangaa's house to be able to convey this unhappy tidings. The house, its dismal atmosphere, with all those people crowding around it, some genuinely disturbed while many just thrilled by the prospect of tragedy, finally told me, what the boy's gestures had not been able to make me understand. Is it not amazing that now that I finally *remember* or rather, have *agreed to remember*, I can recall even such innocuous details like the demeanor of the people gathered there?

I fled from that horrible house but where did I flee? Not to the comforting serenity of my grandparents' home but rather back to that glade. Once again, to our meeting spot that had been the background of Rangaa and my precious friendship! I spotted the portrait lying there then. It must have fallen while the boy and I had moved away to go to Rangaa's place. It was nestled within the drawing book and a good part of it was jutting out. There it was, a beautiful piece of workmanship, with its vivid colours, awash with not just exquisite talent but also the pure emotion of friendship. A gift, so special that, in my traumatized mental state of that time, I just refused to accept. As I confessed to Nalin yesterday, I refused the gift because I was scared. Perhaps he is right. I was scared that if I did accept it, I would also have to accept the harsh truth of my friend's death.

This the simple truth, though any sane being can tell you that there is nothing simple about it. It might be an interesting problem for a psychologist, which I do not care to dwell on. I just feel light having confessed the truth after all these years, not only to Nalin and you but foremost to my own self!

But wait! That is not all. Even now, though it is the truth, it is not the whole truth. I have one more confession to make, which I somehow could not reveal to even Nalin but shall do so now, to you. After all, you and I are hardly separate, Jharnaa. If you were in dark, all these years, that is because I refused to see. Now, that I am ready to see, so you shall see too, what I saw that day in the glade, after I ran back from Rangaa's house.

Yes, I saw the portrait. I also saw something else. I saw *Rangaa herself, sitting at the same place*, handling the colours and other painting materials, which I had been meaning to leave there, as my parting gift. On my arrival at the spot, she looked up and smiled at me. The portrait was lying a few paces away from her.

If I had been hurt some time back, then I was simply shocked now. I have no idea how long I stood there staring at the vision in front of me. For all I know, it could have been a couple of seconds or hours altogether! However, next thing I know, I had turned on my heels and was

running again. Blindly perhaps but this time, towards the happy home beside the lake, where my family was.

So, that Jharnaa, is finally the whole truth. I rejected the gift, deciding to pretend that all that happened that last day was Rangaa's failure to turn up. I blocked out the part where the harsh knowledge of her death was made known to me. However, the memory I buried deepest of all and simply refused to face , was that *I saw Rangaa after I knew she was dead!*

Maybe everything followed from there- The rejection of truth, the pretensions, even the giving up of painting as a hobby.

Are you shocked, Jharnaa? Since my confession to Nalin, I have been reflecting. Why was Rangaa there? Was it her soul which had been waiting for me , in that glade? Having instructed the little boy to convey the gift to me ,because she was no longer able to do so herself, had she still been compelled for one last visit? Does her soul still linger beside that stream? Had she been meaning to convey something special to me, which could only be said at that precise spot? Had her soul been in a hovering state at the house and when it saw me fleeing, it decided to wait at the glade , for me to arrive in person? If yes, was it to insist that I accept her gift or did she have more to say to me? Above all, by running from her that day, did I not just reject her material gift but also all that we had shared?

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A Gift

Nalin felt a little restless, as he waited for Jharnaa.

After Jharnaa's revelations that day in the park, they had met again, and he had confessed. He knew he owed it to Jharnaa to let her know that her sudden ambush by that girl, claiming to be her long lost friend Rangaa, had been orchestrated by him. Nalin had never been a prankster. He had not exactly grown up playing practical jokes upon the people in his life. Yet in this case, he had taken the help of one of his acquaintances to deliver that one sentence to Jharnaa while he had watched for her reaction from a distance.

The incident at Shekhar's wedding reception had given him the idea of taking her by surprise. To be honest, Nalin had not expected to receive such an effective result to this little experiment of his. So, he had been both surprised as well as oddly gratified, when Jharna confessed her strange tale to him. Still, he did feel guilty that he had not been completely honest with her and had come clean with her, at the first opportunity.

Jharnaa's reaction on hearing his confession had not been easy to interpret. He had expected her to be annoyed, perhaps fly into a temper but Jharnaa had done neither. She had listened quietly but not said much. In fact, she had been exceptionally cool in finishing her coffee and leaving right after, citing not anger but urgent work. In Nalin's opinion, it would have been better to have been harshly chastised than the coolness with which his apology had been accepted.

He had also hoped to be able to broach another topic which had been bothering him and he was feeling a little unsure as how to start on it, now that he was no longer sure of Jharnaa's feelings about him.

So, he was fidgeting more than he usually did, as he waited. On purpose, he had chosen this lakeside restaurant today. It was a well-known spot but more importantly, a beautiful and quiet one, where they could converse in peace. And to converse was what Nalin wished, more than anything else.

At last, he spotted her. She was standing near the door, looking around, in that relaxed manner of hers, as she tried to spot him. Before her eyes could fall on him, she was accosted by the proprietor of the establishment and as Nalin watched, he began to guide her towards the corner table, where he was seated. Somehow, her appearance today told Nalin nothing about her state of mind. She smiled at him when she reached the table and after thanking her escort, settled down in her seat, in that distinct unhurried manner, that was so uniquely hers. Nalin

could appreciate why Rangaa had deemed 'Jheeli' the better name for her than 'Jharnaa'. There was something restful about her, like a small but deep lake, not bubbly or excited like a spring. Yet the same Rangaa had been the means of creating more than usual agitation in the gentle waters of this quiet lake ,both thirteen years back and recently.

They chitchatted on usual topics for a while. Not until they had ordered some coffee and snacks, did Nalin decide to broach what was uppermost in his mind.

"Er...I have been wanting to speak with you , Jharnaa. Are you angry with me for pulling that trick on you that day? Please tell me , Jharnaa. It is quite all right if you are upset with me. It was a rather kiddish prank to play on you. The more I thought about it, the more ashamed I was..."

"Yet, it served the purpose, didn't it, Nalin?" Jharnaa said with a quiet laugh.

"Please... Don't talk like that. I guess, I was kind of confused about your attitude in the matter of Rangaa. When I first met you and you talked about her, it was obvious that she had been special to you. It was like you couldn't wait for us to not only know about her but also appreciate the unique talent that she had possessed. You even tried to convince us that her eyes were different from average human eyes. Remember, the conversations about the Tetrachromacy and all..."

"I still believe that Rangaa had special eyes. We will never know now , of course but I do think there was something different about the way she viewed things. She really saw more shades than we do." Jharnaa countered quickly.

The old eagerness was back in her voice , as she made this comment and that gave Nalin hope. Also ,the fact that she did not seem angry about the episode.

"Yes, maybe. But then when the question of trying to locate her came up, you suddenly changed. It was like you were ready to do anything to stall any attempts that could be made to find out about her present whereabouts. Also your vehemence about not painting yourself and all.....it somehow did not add up. So, I had to know , Jharnaa! I am sorry if I have lost credibility in your eyes ,in forcing your hand like that." Nalin was speaking fast as he approached the end of his monologue.

Jharnaa was quiet for a while. It was all the better perhaps for that was the moment chosen by the waiter to come around with their orders. After , they had both taken a bite from their plate of cutlets and taken a few tentative sips of their hot beverages, did Jharnaa speak again.

She let out a sigh before she did and her words were in a more measured tone, now that she had heard Nalin out. " Truly speaking , Nalin, I would not say it is all right. It would not be nice

to be ambushed like this again but , I guess, it was required. I had been blocking out my own memory for years, which had to be faced sooner or later.”

Nalin could make out that she was about to say more, so he patiently waited.

“Yes, it had to be done sooner or later”, repeated Jharnaa and continued. “I can also understand, how it might have puzzled you. After all, you knew nothing about me and my abrupt change of attitude, as you put it, might have seemed odd to anyone.”

Jharnaa shook her head and declared her final verdict. “I am not angry , Nalin but to tell you the truth, I am still processing.” Nalin nodded in understanding but he was relieved at her response.

They enjoyed their snacks and coffee in companionable silence for some time. Then Nalin cleared his throat again. His agenda for the day was not yet done.

Jharnaa looked up with a twinkle in her eyes , as she asked him in a teasing voice. “Now, what more do you want , Nalin?”

“What makes you think, I want something?” , retorted Nalin, though in good natured way.

“That Uhoo Uhoo which you did! You might as well have declared ‘Now for the next point on the agenda’ in a solemn voice”, Jharnaa replied with a chuckle.

Nalin smiled at her teasing. Then, without saying a further word, he brought a parcel ,out of the bag that had been lying on the seat beside him. It was wrapped in brown paper and sealed with adhesive tape. This he extended to her from across the table. She seemed to be surprised but took it, nevertheless. Her eyes seemed to ask him what it was.

“As far as I know, it is not my birthday, so what do I owe this pleasure to?” Jharnaa’s eyes ,which unlike many people, always smiled when her lips did, did have a shine in them, as she handled the package.

“Whoever said that you can get gifts only on your birthday? Go ahead , open it.”, Nalin encouraged.

Jharnaa smiled and proceeded to do it. Nalin , however, had one more thing to say before she did. He reached across the table to hold one of her hands firmly and said in a quiet voice. “Jharnaa, I believe this gift has been due for a long time.” Then, he let go of her hand and she proceeded to open the gift.

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Dear Jharnaa

[Excerpt from Jharnaa's diary]

Dear Jharnaa,

Nalin sprung a surprise on me today. After he had assured himself that I was not raging mad with him for the prank he had played on me, he gifted me something.

It is not so much the fact that he gave me a gift, which is the big deal here, rather the nature of the gift he chose to give. You might be surprised but honestly speaking, I am not.

His 'gift' was a heavy package , that contained every conceivable item that an amateur artist could possibly need. Right from various grades of sketching pencils to a good assortment of paint brushes, sets of both oil and water colour paints , mixing palette and reams of drawing paper. It had everything that could possibly be needed to draw and paint a picture to completion.

I did not know what to say. Perhaps , I would not be wrong if I describe my reaction as more shock than delight, as I looked at the spread. More than the items in themselves , it was the implication that I can no longer choose to ignore. Nalin had said this to me before but the very act of his gifting me all this ,seemed to say that it simply was the path forward. For years, I have avoided painting paraphernalia like the plague but , is it finally time to give up the ghost? Should I really take up a sketching pencil again and start mixing up colours to paint up a storm?

For sure, I do not have half the talent that Rangaa had, nor the special vision that she was gifted with. But I too had loved colours once! Loved to feast my eyes on the various shades ,contained within the same colour range or spotted the contrasts between the close ones. It had been a source of joy to me once. Could it be again?

Rangaa, she never pursued me again, not after that last, fateful day in the glade. Even then, in that extraordinary moment when everything was turned on its head, the look in her beautiful, brownish-black eyes, had been of benevolence and affection. Had it also been also of hope? Hope that I have resolutely kept at bay, all these years, that Rangaa could continue to live on in every spot of colour that was to be had, in this beauteous, colourful world?

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Back to the future

Shekhar *da*, as usual, was looking effortlessly handsome, mused Jharnaa, as he stood near the entrance of the exhibition hall, greeting the arriving guests. She smiled as their eyes met and he waved gaily at her. She walked up the steps quickly as Shekhar too came down a couple of steps to meet her half way.

“Now, isn’t that the real, mystical artist attitude? Late for your own exhibition!”, Shekhar said in a chiding tone.

“It is not my sole exhibition, Shekhar *da*!”, laughed Jharnaa.

“Whatever! All the other humble artists are already inside, fretting about how their work shall be received. But you of course must stroll in at the last moment , as if you do it every other day!”, Shekhar continued in his teasing voice.

“Honestly, it was not my fault. First, Mom wanted me to wear a heavy saree, with a lot of gaudy jewelry, that I simply could not allow. Then it was Nalin. He chose this day to run another errand on the way, which further delayed us”, explained Jharnaa. Although, Shekhar was sure that she was ,no way, upset with either of the two mentioned offenders, he was observant enough to detect the undercurrent of excitement in her voice. He shrugged in an amused way, as he took her elbow to guide her inside the hall, which was now fast filling up. Her father, she knew , was already inside. Maybe , Shekhar , in his usual thoughtful way ,had arranged for him to be comfortably seated, so that he should not get tired.

Just that moment, Nalin , who had been parking the car, arrived with Madhuri in tow and all three of them got talking. Jharnaa strolled away on her own, her steps guiding her instinctively towards the other end of the hall, where she knew, her paintings were on display. It was still quiet in that corner. Much as she was fond of her family and Nalin, she was happy to have a few moments of solitude.

To most people, this day would seem special because Jharna’s work was being exhibited, an honour desired by any artist. However, deep down her heart, Jharnaa was aware that the more special moment had been when she had decided to draw and paint again. Nalin’s gift had lain dormant for a while but there had been an inevitability about it, so one fine day, she had finally given in. If she had been afraid that Rangaa would haunt her, she had been proved right. Only the haunting had been of a good kind, inspiring her to appreciate subtle shade differences and their distinct beauty. It had made her life richer and happier. Definitely more colourful, Jharnaa realized.

“Those eyes look dreamy , yet sharp and exquisite in a way, I cannot say how” . The voice had a rich mellifluous quality about it that jolted Jharnaa out of her reverie. She turned back to see a woman admiring the painting, she herself had been gazing at , a few minutes back. Jharnaa held her breath. It was only natural that as an artist she should. After all, hearing someone else, that too a stranger, comment on her rendition of Rangaa’s eyes, was sure to elicit something in her heart.

Both Nalin and Shekhar had urged her to try a portrait of Rangaa. Still, she had been hesitant. It was one thing to remember a loved face and a completely different thing to try to reproduce it on paper. It had also been a disturbing realization that , despite her fond feelings for her lost friend, her memory had failed to recollect the exact features of that face. The eyes , though, had lingered. As , if having remained unacknowledged for so long, the memory of those almond-shaped brownish-black eyes, framed by those curved, long lashes ,had taken a life of their own ,on the page. So, instead of attempting a full portrait, Jharnaa had concentrated on rendering just that beautiful pair. The painting titled ‘A special pair’ showed just the upper half of a face, with the focus solely on the eyes. It was a strange, yet a beautiful painting, which the woman had commented on.

Jharnaa stood aside to allow the woman to better see the picture. She looked of indeterminate age ,though the wrinkles around her eyes , belied her youngish appearance. She smiled at Jharnaa , as if they both shared a secret.

“Yes, that is the painting which I would have liked to buy. A pity the artist does not wish to part with it. But then maybe, it is special to her. There does seem something special about it!” Having made this declaration, she moved away, leaving Jharnaa alone with Rangaa’s eyes again.

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Dear Jharnaa

[Excerpt from Jharnaa's diary]

Dear Jharnaa,

I have finally realized something, that has set my heart free!

It goes without saying that having taken up painting after a gap of thirteen solid years, it has been hard getting back into the groove of it. I was never exceptionally talented but I daresay, my younger self did have a healthy approach to sketching and coloring, before she gave it all up.

My unique friend Rangaa had , in a strange way, been both my mentor and captor, when it came to realizing my talent.

I wonder , Jharnaa, if the reason Rangaa had come back to our glade that day, was to convey something! The last thing, I saw of her, were her eyes, as she gazed at me that day. As if she wanted to ensure that even if I forgot her face some day, I would not forget those eyes.

Had those eyes been tetrachromatic? Maybe yes, maybe no but unique they had surely been. Unique because they saw more. Not just more colours but more colours within the obvious colours! More beauty, more life!

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APPENDIX

Jharna : Hindi/Bengali word for spring or waterfall

Jheel : Hindi word for lake

Pukur : Bengali word for pond, pronounced as 'pookoor'.

Rang: Hindi / Bengali word for colour

Rangaa: Derived from 'Rang' , the word for colour, it essentially means 'one who is coloured'. It can be a person's name also.

Saree: An Indian dress worn by women. Twelve yards long cloth draped in a certain style and worn along with blouse and petticoat.

Aam panna: A cool, refreshing drink, made with mangoes, with a sweet-sour taste. Usually drunk during hot summer season.

Pishi: Father's sister

Da : Short form of 'Dada', which is a term of endearment for an elder brother.

Di: Short form of 'Didi', which is a term of endearment for an elder sister.

Indian families are quite big and anyone older in age is rarely called by simply their name. In fact, addressing someone older than you, by just name, is considered downright disrespectful. The eldest sibling is often referred to as 'Bordi' or 'Borda'. The next in line is 'Mejdi' or 'Mejda', followed by 'Sejdi' or 'Sejda'. The youngest is 'Chhod di' or 'Chhod da'. The other siblings lying between the third and the youngest are often given some innovative connotation, such as "Phool", meaning flower or "Rangaa", meaning colourful. Here Shekhar's cousin is referred as 'Rangaa di' for the same reason, by her younger cousins.

The other alternative is to simply add 'da' or 'di' with the name. That is how Jharna addresses her maternal cousin Shekhar, whom she calls 'Shekhar da'. Younger or same age people can be addressed by simply their names.

End